

ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE: THE
ZOMBIE'S CONSUMPTION
OF AMERICAN FILM

by

RONNI M. DAVIS

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ABSTRACT

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Ronni M. Davis, M.A.

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2011

Supervising Professor: Penelope Ingram

American film has chronicled the evolution of the zombie mythos for nearly eight decades. Originally constructed as a projection of the plight of the enslaved population of Haiti, the zombie as introduced to American film remains a symbol of societal anxieties. I argue that, to reflect the changing zeitgeist, the zombie shifts into three general forms. The Haitian *Zombi* is generally a passive creature subject to the will of its creator; it reveals desire to control people that either pose a threat or that have something that the creator covets and is otherwise unable to attain. The Extraterrestrial Zombie represents shared anguish over the consequences of space exploration and nuclear technology development, which emerged together after World War II. The Apocalyptic Zombie, which has taken over the genre and caused an explosion of zombie interest in the last decade, reveals fears awakened by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: fears of hidden threats, biological weapons, powerlessness in the face of government betrayal or abandonment, and, perhaps most importantly, becoming a monster. Examining the zombie as a cultural body provides a space to explore the roots and possible outcomes and solutions of serious underlying concerns on the minds of many contemporary Americans.

PREFACE

Since the first film zombie wandered across the silver screen in 1932, the zombie mythos has become entrenched in American culture. Each time it returns from the dead, the zombie brings with it culturally shared anxieties that refuse to stay buried. I argue that the zombie in American cinema has evolved in three different stages: the Haitian *Zombi*, the Extraterrestrial Zombie, and the Apocalyptic Zombie.

The earliest film zombies, inspired by the *zombi* of Haitian folklore and brought home by Americans occupying the island nation during the early twentieth century, examine the relationship between powerless zombies and their controlling creators. As the zombie began to appear more frequently, it grew into an aggressive creature, often committing acts of murder and, eventually, becoming an outright cannibal, controlled only by its hunger. These more dangerous zombies, which first emerged from their graves in the 1950s, came in greater numbers and answered to no human, as their ancestors had. With their stories overlapping competitive nuclear weapons development and space exploration in the United States, they presented a possible scenario in which ordinary humans could be turned into monsters by an extraterrestrial force, such as an astral body, an alien population, or radiation. As the twentieth century progressed and biological warfare became more common and more advanced, the zombie became an even larger threat, as its condition became an actual contagion, usually introduced into the population by its own government; because anyone could be infected and passing on the condition without even knowing it, the zombie was now capable of rapidly unraveling entire civilizations. This type of zombie experienced an explosion in popularity following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and it continues to spread its apocalyptic terror at an ever growing rate in theaters across America more than a decade later.

In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that "Monsters are our children" (20). He explains that:

[M]onsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them. (20)

With the zombie now emerging as a multi-billion dollar industry,¹ and with zombies crawling, lurching, attacking, and devouring their way across big-budget American horror films every few months or so, it is undeniable that American filmgoers see something in the zombie that speaks to them, something they perhaps even want to address, even if only in the safe space of a movie. Zombie films take on everything from race and gender tension, to fear of technology, to mistrust of the government, to fear of the end of the world. By looking at some of the most culturally significant American zombie films created over the last eighty years, we can hope to glean an understanding of what it is that Americans fear most as a whole, what needs to be better understood, and what actions need to occur in order to resolve these anxieties.

¹ See "Zombies Worth Over \$5 Billion to Economy" at *247wallst.com*, 25 October 2011.

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CHAPTER 1

THE HAITIAN *ZOMBI*: SLAVES, SINNERS, AND SORCERERS

I thought that beauty alone would satisfy. But the soul is gone. I can't bear those empty, staring eyes.

White Zombie, 1932

That's where our people came from. From the misery and pain of slavery. For generations, they found life a burden. That's why they still weep when a child is born and make merry at a burial. I've told you, Miss Connell, this is a sad place.

I Walked With a Zombie, 1943

A twenty-first century American audience watching a zombie film expects to see swarms of snarling, ravenous, contagious former humans descending upon an ever-dwindling population of uninfected humans who attempt to fight them off with whatever tools they have at their disposal. In the eight decades since their film debut, however, zombies have evolved significantly from something that would be almost unrecognizable to a contemporary audience: the Haitian *Zombi*. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote in her 1938 anthropological work *Tell My Horse*, *zombi* is “the word that never fails to interest tourists” in Haiti. From the Haitian Creole word meaning “animated corpse,” a *zombi* is an individual who has been resurrected from the grave at the hands of a *zombi* creator in order to mindlessly do the bidding of that creator. The Haitian *Zombi* is unlikely to take a bite out of someone or infect them with any illness, as it is not a threat to living humans unless it has been commanded to harm another by its creator, and its condition is not contagious. In his article “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes that a monster is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment” whose body “quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (4). The Haitian *Zombi*, while ostracized, is not truly feared, as it has no free will, no voice, and no soul; the fear and anxiety embodied in this creature stem from Haiti's own tragic history of slavery and oppression and reveal ultimately the fear of losing all remaining agency at the hands of another who is more powerful.

1.1 A Monster is Born: The Slave Owner and the *Bokor*

Haiti's population was not the first to incorporate the concept of the dead returning from their graves into its folklore; civilizations all over the world have harbored superstitions and told stories about the possible resurrection of the dead for thousands of years. This particular form of the age-old tale of the dead rising from their graves, however, is the zombie first seen on screen, which draws inspiration from Haiti's own history. Situated just west of the Dominican Republic on the Caribbean island of Quisqueya,² the nation now known as the Republic of Haiti has had more than its share of political strife over the past several centuries, thus providing a perfect breeding ground for a creature whose very existence is the result of a power struggle. Prior to Christopher Columbus's arrival on 5 December 1492, five chiefdoms of Taíno Amerindians shared Quisqueya.³ Although these chiefdoms fought against Spanish conquest, eventually, huge numbers of Taínos were slaughtered by the Spanish, perished as a result of infectious diseases brought from Europe, or became slaves in Spain's goldmines. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Taínos were all but extinct, leaving the labor force severely diminished and creating a demand for the import of the island's first African slaves.

Although the slave trade was established on the island by Spain, it continued and even swelled to enormous proportions in the western part of the island under French control. France began settling the western third of the island (what would become Haiti) after buccaneers established a pirate hub on the Ile de la Tortue (commonly known as Tortuga) off the northwest coast of Quisqueya and began attacking their way onto the larger island. With the bulk of their business conducted on the eastern two-thirds of the island (what would eventually become the Dominican Republic), Spanish authorities were unable to maintain a stronghold in the west, and, after decades of disputes between them, Spain officially ceded control of this part of the

² Several sources, including Steeve Coupeau's *The History of Haiti*, use one of the earlier Taíno names, *Quisqueya*, to refer to the island more commonly known as Hispaniola, a name given to it by Christopher Columbus. This represents a recent trend towards restoring the island's earlier name and cultural identity, and, as this restoration better suits my purposes, I have chosen to use this name as well.

³ See *The History of Haiti* (Steeve Coupeau), *Haiti: Her History and Her Detractors* (Jacques Nicolas Léger), *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Wade Davis), and *Haiti: A Country Profile* (Library of Congress, Federal Research Division).

island to France in the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697. Cultivating sugar and coffee as its primary exports, the French shaped the territory that they called Saint-Domingue into a thriving colony (so profitable, in fact, that it was known as “the Pearl of the Antilles”) whose economy was built on the backs of nearly 800,000 African slaves. With business booming and death rates high due to tropical disease and brutal work conditions, Saint-Domingue constantly resupplied its labor force, importing enough African captives to account for nearly a third of the entire Atlantic slave trade.

As a result of this constant slave traffic, the majority of slaves in the colony at any given time were African-born and maintained strong attachments to their native culture, particularly to the folk religion Vodou, which evolved from West African Vodun. A strong and shared cultural identity amongst the slaves, together with sheer numbers, made the possibility of a slave rebellion an ever-present threat. In an attempt to circumvent this, white landowners passed legislation restricting the rights of non-whites in varying degrees so that a sort of caste system evolved with three distinct racial groups: white colonists (also called *blancs*), *gens de couleur libres* (or “free people of color”), and slaves. With an overwhelmingly non-white population on the island, however, the second and third groups, inspired in part by France’s own revolution and publishing of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789, banded together to overthrow the French government in a bloody revolution beginning with a slave rebellion in 1791 and ending with French defeat in 1803. On the first of January 1804, revolutionary general Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Saint-Domingue a free republic and renamed it Haiti after the Taíno name (*Ayiti*) for the area. This victory made the new Republic of Haiti the first nation in Latin America to achieve independence and, perhaps even more notably, the world’s “first modern state governed by people of African descent” (Library of Congress).

Race and class discrimination, however, did not end with the expulsion of the white French government. The *gens de couleur libres*, many of whom were mixed-race children of white landowning fathers and slave mothers, established a new caste system with themselves

as the new minority ruling class, or the *Elite*, and the former slaves as the majority subordinate class, or the *Noirs*, and these distinctions have carried over for two centuries (Lobb 24-25). Apart from having a noticeably different skin tone and general appearance, the *Elite* started out with more advantages than the *Noirs*: frequently, their white fathers had paid for their education and artisan or military training and/or had provided for them financially. This put them at a distinct advantage over the *Noirs*, who generally had no wealth of any kind and had only the skill set that they had acquired as primarily agricultural laborers. Continued political unrest and extreme poverty in Haiti have kept these lines drawn between the two classes in the 200 years since its independence; today, the groups for the most part live separately, observe different cultural practices, speak different languages (with the *Elite* speaking French and the *Noirs* speaking Haitian Creole), and typically do not intermingle or intermarry (Lobb 25-26).

Although the *Noirs* hold less power, they continue to significantly outnumber the *Elite*, and it is their mythology that has come to define the country for many outsiders. According to the CIA *World Factbook*, roughly half of the population of Haiti was still practicing Vodou at the beginning of 2011; these practitioners belong almost exclusively to the lower class and live primarily in rural areas, perhaps due to the stigma associated with the practice in urban areas. The combination of the superstitions of Vodou and the long-running oppression of this class of people render gives birth to two central cultural figures: the *zombi* and the *zombi* creator, or *bokor*.⁴ Indicative of the plight of the *Noirs*, the *zombi* wears a vacant expression to indicate that it has been stripped of its life force or soul, lacks the ability to determine its own actions, and is unable to protest, no matter what difficult or degrading chore it is asked to do. In most stories, their creators use them for physical labor, crime, and sexual fulfillment, much in the same way that slave owners often used slaves. Haitian writer René Depestre puts it best: "It is not by

⁴ According to Wade Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, there are two types of Vodou priests. The *bokor* is the "priest who serves with the left hand," or the priest practicing "evil"; the *houngan* is the priest practicing "good" (47). Davis's source, an *houngan* and Vodou scholar named Max Beauvoir, points out, however, that this distinction is less clear cut than it seems; as he explained it to Davis, "[t]he *houngan* must know evil to combat it, the *bokor* must embrace good in order to subvert it. It is all one. The *bokor* who knows the magic can make anyone a *zombi*....Likewise, I can treat a victim, should I choose" (47).

chance that there exists in Haiti the myth of the zombi, that is, of the living-dead, the man whose mind and soul have been stolen and who has been left only the ability to work. The history of colonization is the process of man's general zombification" (qtd. in Paravisini-Gebert 39). Out of this legacy of oppression arises not one but two monsters, the *zombi* and the *bokor*; of these, the *bokor* is the more terrifying of the two, since the *zombi* is, more often than not, harmless unless otherwise commanded by his creator, whereas the *bokor*, like the slave owner, possesses the ability to strip a person completely of all free will and agency in order to serve his own purposes.

1.2 Secret Societies and Sex: Two Types of Zombification in Haitian History and Folklore

Zombi stories existed in Haiti well before any zombies ever appeared on a movie screen. In these folktales, often accepted as truth by Vodou-practicing Haitians, the *zombi* is created for two possible reasons. One of these, which Harvard-educated ethnobotanist and anthropologist Wade Davis discusses in his controversial⁵ anthropological text *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (1988), involves punishment for violating the moral or ethical codes of secret societies known as *Bizangos*. Although they evolved from the sorcerer societies of West Africa, *Bizangos* took on a new function in colonial Haiti: they were initially formed by "isolated communities of escaped slaves" and evolved after the end of slavery into primarily rural secret societies amongst the *Noirs* whose primary purpose is "protecting their own community interests from outside threats" (Davis, *Passage* 237). *Bizangos* provide a hierarchy and set of social sanctions for members of the lower class who might otherwise not have a voice or a role in their own government, which has been largely dominated by the *Elite*. Because membership is voluntary and open only to adults, initiates to a given *Bizango* accept

⁵ Both his works about the Haitian *zombi*, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Passage of Darkness* have been criticized by other members of his field because, due to the variable nature of tetrodotoxin (a chemical found in puffer fish, among other animals, which increases or decreases in amount and efficacy depending upon the fish's diet and environment), his findings cannot be consistently repeated; he has also been criticized for commissioning (by his own admission in his writings) the unauthorized excavation of a recently buried child in the interest of creating the zombie poison, which requires dead human tissue.

the guidelines of the group when they join, and, while *Bizango* justice is commonly viewed as excessive and cruel from the outside, the codes and punishments are clearly outlined and agreed upon by its members (Davis, *Passage* 249). Zombification is, admittedly, significant cause for fear, but a *bokor* working within a *Bizango* will not zombify someone unless other leaders have agreed that this person has violated the sanctions. Davis cites one *Bizango* emperor and several presidents who list seven common transgressions that warrant *Bizango* intervention:

1. Ambition – excessive material advancement at the obvious expense of family and dependents
2. Displaying lack of respect for one's fellows
3. Denigrating the *Bizango* society
4. Stealing another man's woman
5. Spreading loose talk that slanders and affects the well-being of others
6. Harming members of one's family
7. Land issues – any action that unjustly keeps another from working the land. (Davis, *Passage* 278)

In the instance of Clairvius Narcisse, an actual Haitian man who was allegedly zombified and forced to work on a sugar plantation as punishment for violating the behavioral codes of his *Bizango*, the offenses entailed failure to support his numerous illegitimate children, despite leading a lavish lifestyle himself, and an extended dispute with his brother over family landholdings (Davis, *Passage* 279). His story, which is the primary subject of Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), details how he was declared dead in 1962, buried, and subsequently disinterred by a *bokor*, who, until the *bokor's* death two years later, kept Narcisse and others compliant by administering regular doses of *Datura stramonium*, a plant species known in Haiti as *concombre zombi*, or "the zombie's cucumber" (Davis, *Serpent* 39). Used in several countries around the world as a ritual hallucinogenic or, in larger doses, as a deadly

poison, *Datura stramonium* causes delusions, confusion, disorientation, and memory loss (Davis, *Serpent* 37-40).

In *Passage of Darkness*, Davis details the ingredients used in the zombie powder in an attempt to recast these “magical” practices as the result of an understanding of chemistry; however, “[z]ombification continues to be perceived as a magical process by which the sorcerer seizes the victim’s *ti bon ange*—the component of the soul where personality, character, and volition reside—leaving behind an empty vessel subject to the commands of the bokor” (Davis, *Serpent* 38). Whatever the perceived cause of the zombification, though, in these cases, the process is “far from being the result of arbitrary sorcery performed by the bokor for his own personal gain” but rather a “an important arbiter of social life among the peasantry” and “a force that protects community resources, particularly land, as they define the power boundaries of the village” (Paravisini-Gebert 38). The process itself might be a mystery, but the reasoning behind the process is not.

The second reason for creating a *zombi*, which Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert details in her article “Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie,” has to do solely with women and is primarily (but not exclusively) used in a literary or folkloric context. As Paravisini-Gebert writes, common elements in these stories include:

the coveting of a beautiful, light-skinned or white upper-class girl by an older, dark-skinned man who is of lower class and is adept at sorcery; the intimation of necromantic sexuality with a girl who has lost her volition; the wedding night...as the preferred setting for the administration of the zombie poison; the girl’s eventual escape from the bokor in her soiled wedding clothes (the garment of preference for white or light-skinned zombie women). (40)

This is the case in the story of a young woman referred to only as “Marie M.,” whose allegedly true story of zombification is outlined by Hurston in *Tell My Horse*. In her case, Marie was the daughter of a wealthy family who was believed to have died at the hands of her grandmother

working with an unnamed influential man in the village. The girl reappeared five years later, “wild, unkempt, demented, and [having] borne three children”; when her grave was excavated, inside her coffin was “the wedding dress in which she had been buried” alongside the remains “of a man whose legs [had] been cut off and laid alongside [his] body” in order to fit him into Marie’s smaller coffin (Paravisini-Gebert 40). Various other versions of this same tale, some rumored to have basis in fact, and others strictly acknowledged as fictional, are scattered throughout Haitian literary and oral tradition, continuing to this day.

1.3 ‘Til Death Do Us Part: The Zombie Bride in *White Zombie*

It is one such version of this tale that forms the basis of the first zombie movie, *White Zombie*, in 1932. Paravisini-Gebert theorizes that the form of Haitian *zombi* first depicted in American cinema (the female zombie-as-sex-object) appealed to American filmmakers and audiences because, although the roots of these stories are actually Haitian, they adapt particularly well to a white colonizing population’s desire to cast Haitian conquest and political history as “an erotic quest that privileges the white woman as innocent victim” (56). In doing so, it blots out the gritty reality of a creature that evolved from a history of slavery, racism, and oppression, which appealed to Americans at the time because of the United States’ newfound role in Haiti’s colonization. Due to its prime trade location within the Caribbean and between the Americas, continued political and economic instability, and growing debt to the United States and several European nations, Haiti became the subject of much interest to and debate between wealthier nations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the Monroe Doctrine (1823) held that any perceived attempts by European nations to colonize any part of the Americas would be viewed by the United States as an act of aggression, the Roosevelt Corollary, created in 1904, expanded on this with the assertion that the United States had a right and obligation to provide assistance to struggling countries within the Americas; using this as justification, United States Marines occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

It is no coincidence that the zombie phenomenon in the United States began during this time, with the releases of both the Broadway play *Zombie* and the Victor Halperin film *White Zombie* in 1932. Written by Garnett Weston and directed by Halperin, *White Zombie* presents the story of Neil and Madeleine, a young American couple who has reunited in Haiti, where Neil's work has taken him, with plans to be married. Charles Beaumont, a plantation owner on the island, offers his estate as the venue for the wedding but with ulterior motives: Charles has his sights set on Madeleine and, hoping to steal her away from Neil, has asked for the assistance of Murder Legendre, a Vodou practitioner whose own sugar mill is operated entirely by zombies that he has created. Murder passes the couple in a carriage on their way to the Beaumont estate, takes Madeleine's scarf, and stares deeply and menacingly into her eyes, frightening her. Having determined from this encounter that she is truly in love with Neil, he tells Charles that his only option is to administer a zombie potion before her marriage; although Charles resists the idea initially, his attempts to win Madeleine over just before the ceremony are fruitless, so he secretly slips the poison into her drink, and she falls over, seemingly dead, just after the completion of her nuptials. Charles and Murder retrieve her from her tomb and revive her as a zombie, which, Charles soon learns, is not exactly what he had in mind. Unable to bear having her in this now empty vessel, he entreats Murder to return her to her original self, but, as it turns out, Murder cannot be trusted and, in addition to having his own motivations for wanting Madeleine as a zombie, he has also slipped the zombie potion into Charles's drink. Meanwhile, a devastated Neil uncovers what has happened, rushes to her rescue, and, although he is nearly killed by his knife-wielding zombie wife, he manages to dispose of both Murder and Charles, after which, Madeleine is restored to her former self.

Despite following the Haitian traditional storyline nearly to the letter, the name *White Zombie* fits on a number of levels. In addition to Madeleine's virginal status (having been zombified on her wedding night, in her white dress, before she and Neil could consummate their marriage), she, along with pretty much everyone else in the film, is white. Although the film is

set on Haiti and characters frequently mention “the natives” (by which they mean the black descendents of the displaced African slaves rather than the island’s true natives), non-white actors in the film receive only fleeting instances of screen time. Somehow, though, the nearly non-existent “native” population still manages to terrify the white characters, who make statements such as Neil’s exclamation, “Surely you don’t think [Madeleine]’s alive in the hands of natives? Oh, no, better dead than that!” This is following the rejection of his initial hypothesis that Charles was behind the entire thing by Dr. Bruner, the character helping him to uncover what happened to his bride. Bruner assures Neil that the white Charles could not be responsible but that this terrible act is “native work” and tells him that Madeleine has likely been taken as a slave of sorts, insinuating that her purpose might be sexual (a notion that the movie poster also points to, with Murder’s evil face looming behind an image of Madeleine with her arms outstretched invitingly and the tagline “She was not alive...nor dead...just a White Zombie, performing his every desire!”). Even the evil Murder, whose race is never directly addressed but who is lumped in with the “natives,” is only ambiguously non-white. Horror master Bela Lugosi plays the role, with his Hungarian accent only loosely disguised so that it comes across as unidentifiable but clearly not American, and with his dark features heavily emphasized with dark makeup. Perhaps these awkward attempts to make “white” the storyline so familiar in Haitian folklore undermined some of the tension in the story, which was less relatable in the first place to a predominantly white American audience; although the film was considered commercially successful for an independent film released during the Great Depression, critics were less than kind on nearly every aspect except Lugosi’s performance.⁶ *White Zombie* has retained cultural significance nearly eighty years since its debut because it was the first feature-length zombie film; however, bringing the Haitian *Zombi* to an American audience required more transformation of the narrative.

⁶ See *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film*, Gary Don Rhodes (2001).

1.4 Dear John and Rosie the Riveter: Woman as Villain in *I Walked With a Zombie*

Although a handful of other zombie films appeared in the 1930s and early 1940s, the first zombie film that was, for the most part, both critically and commercially successful was one that took a few more steps toward Americanizing the Haitian *Zombi* narrative. Jeff Stafford, writer for the Turner Classic Movie Database, describes *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) as “a very loose adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, transposed to a Caribbean setting.” Approached with only a title, which he hated but which was forced upon him by a studio executive who felt that it was highly marketable, Russian-American producer Val Lewton gave his writers the task of adapting Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) to a Caribbean setting, complete with Vodou. By basing much of the storyline on that of a canonical piece of English literature, Lewton and his writers constructed a film that was already more accessible to their targeted white American audience. Remarkably, they also managed to present a few of the traditions of Vodou with some degree of accuracy and, while there is no mistaking that the white characters are the central focus of this story, there is also some recognition of the plight of the island’s black residents and its deep and painful roots in slavery (probably somewhat aided by the fact that the film features a number of actors who are actually black rather than just vaguely dark). Although it is still a distinctly white story, and the white characters do often patronize the black characters with the attitude of “the white man’s burden,” Lewton and his writers did make a good faith effort to maintain some of the racial undertones, which likely gave more significance and romantic appeal to the concept of the Haitian *Zombi* for American viewers that had very little previous knowledge and understanding of this cultural phenomenon, apart from what they saw in movies.

That being said, race does not play a role in the actual zombification of Jessica Holland, whose husband Paul, a sugar plantation owner, has summoned a young nurse named Betsy Connell to the fictional Caribbean island of Saint Sebastian to care for the beautiful but catatonic Jessica. As evidence of Betsy’s youthful naïveté, she spends much of the opening sequences

of the film exclaiming over how beautiful everything is, to which she gets a variety of responses, none of which coincide with her view. On the boat to the island, Paul tells her:

Everything seems beautiful because you don't understand. Those flying fish, they're not leaping for joy—they're jumping in terror. Bigger fish want to eat them. That luminous water? It takes its gleam from millions of tiny dead bodies. The glitter of putrescence.

There's no beauty here, only death and decay....Everything good dies here.

On her drive back to the estate, her black carriage driver tells her the story behind the statue on the Holland plantation that the black residents refer to as "Ti-Misery" (actually Saint Sebastian, the island's namesake, shown with arrows penetrating his sides): the statue came from the front of a slave ship owned by Paul Holland's ancestors, who brought over African slaves "chained to the bottom of the boat." To this, she dreamily replies, "They brought you to a beautiful place, didn't they?" Characterizing her in this way—innocent to the point of being oblivious to the evils and injustices in the world—presents her in sharp contrast to Jessica, who, because she spends the entire film in bed or wandering aimlessly with blank eyes, has to be constructed by the stories of others. Jessica, as it turns out, was both beautiful and vain. Others insinuate that she did not love Paul, possibly marrying him for his wealth, and then seduced his half-brother, Wesley Rand, with whom she was planning to run away before she fell into a "tropical fever" that the island doctor blames for her present condition. The doctor informs Betsy that, because of the fever, "portions of her spinal cord were burned out," the result of which "is what you see: a woman without any willpower, unable to speak or even act by herself, though she will obey simple commands." He calls her a "beautiful zombie" but says he prefers to think of her "as a sleepwalker who can never be awakened—feeling nothing, knowing nothing." He tells her that he knows of no cure for her condition, but, as the viewer learns over the course of the film, this is not a fever but rather Jessica's punishment for her wicked ways.

Because Betsy develops an attraction to her morose employer, she becomes determined to cure Jessica, convinced that her return will make him happy again. She

convinces the doctor to try some futile experimental treatments before Alma, a black house servant, suggests that she take Jessica to the *hounfor* (or Vodou temple). Betsy initially dismisses this as “nonsense” but eventually determines that it is her only remaining option. Upon entering the *hounfor*, Betsy is surprised to find Mrs. Rand, mother to both Paul and Wesley and widow of a doctor who tended to the villagers. Mrs. Rand tells Betsy that she became involved in the Vodou ceremonies when her husband died as a way to get the black villagers to obey her; she cites an example where she instructed a mother to boil her child’s drinking water to purify it but was only able to actually convince the woman to do so by pretending that their gods spoke through her, promising to kill the evil spirits in the water if it was boiled. It later comes out that Mrs. Rand is responsible for Jessica’s zombification. While pretending during a ceremony to be possessed by a Vodou god, she kept seeing Jessica’s face, “smiling because she was beautiful enough to take [Mrs. Rand’s] family in her hands and tear it apart,” and felt herself actually becoming possessed. She claims that she (supposedly as one of their deities) told the *houngan* that the woman at Fort Holland was “evil” and asked him to zombify her. When she came back to herself, she felt guilty, but, not believing that zombification was possible, she convinced herself that everything would be fine, until she returned to the Holland estate to find Jessica “raging with fever.” Whether or not the viewer believes that Mrs. Rand was actually possessed, it is clear that Jessica’s “crimes” were severe enough to warrant zombification as punishment in the eyes of the *houngan*. In the end, both Jessica and Wesley die, presumably for their sinful behavior together, and Paul makes it clear that he does not love Jessica but instead has developed feelings for the pure and innocent Betsy, who can save him from Jessica’s darkness and depravity.

Jessica’s case fits into the narrative conveyed by Davis, wherein an individual is zombified for being in violation of the moral or ethical codes of the society. Significantly, however, this film removes the conflict between races, classes, or cultures that appears as the motive for zombification in both the Haitian story of the zombified female (wherein a darker,

lower class male desires a lighter, higher class female) and in *Jane Eyre*, where the insane and bestial Bertha Mason's condition is attributed largely to the fact that she is a Creole who married an Englishman. Described as dark, formerly beautiful, and fiery (literally—she intentionally sets two fires in the novel, the second of which claims her life), she allegedly has madness in her blood; Rochester, who refers to her in subhuman terms such as “half-caste” and “lunatic,” claims to have been tricked into marrying her by his father, who wanted her family money and never mentioned her natural predisposition to insanity. Although both Rochester and Paul Holland are portrayed as behaving in a less than chivalrous way to their respective wives, ultimately, the reader or viewer is supposed to believe that it is the wife's shortcomings that justify her complete removal of agency in Jessica's case and her treatment as a caged animal in Bertha's case. In her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a postcolonial response to *Jane Eyre*, white Caribbean-born author Jean Rhys incorporates the Vodou and *zombi* aspects of *I Walked With a Zombie* directly into the plot of *Jane Eyre*; she provides the back story for Bertha Mason, whom she renames Antoinette Cosway, and addresses racial and cultural distinctions directly in connection with Antoinette's final, zombie-like state.

For its predominantly white American audience, however, *I Walked With a Zombie* steers clear of these issues as being at the heart of zombification and presents it solely as a moral – and, more specifically, *female* – issue: Jessica is portrayed as a vain, selfish, gold-digging seductress who loses her agency when she oversteps the bounds of her role as a good, devoted wife. The need to punish her for this transgression speaks directly to a rising fear in the American population at the time of the film's release in 1943. After the United States entered into World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. Census Bureau reported a spike in the number of marriages and a decrease in the average age of marriage for both men and women over the next decade. Couples were rushing into marriages before the soldiers shipped out; in many cases, the bride and groom had known each other only a short while and/or were fresh out of high school. Leaving their new wives behind,

often barely knowing them well enough to place full trust in their fidelity, was frightening enough, and in this particular war, the soldiers had more cause for alarm than they had in previous wars. Ever since Margaret Sanger's arrest in 1916 for "disseminating information on birth control" (a term which she coined) at her clinic in Brooklyn, New York, options for pregnancy prevention had increased for women; by the 1920s, the appearance of condoms "at barbershops, pharmacies, and gas station rest rooms" allowed for a new generation of women, the flappers, to take part in premarital sex, often with multiple partners, with a significantly decreased risk of pregnancy (Jennings 117). A situation like *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester Prynne's⁷ was no longer inevitable for a woman engaging in an extramarital affair while her husband was stationed overseas for months or even years at a time. Furthermore, much of the predominantly male American workforce was otherwise occupied serving in the war, so necessity required that more women venture out into the working world; it was during this time that the now iconic image of Rosie the Riveter became popular. Having their own skill sets and incomes made a husband's contributions less essential, and, combined with some access to birth control, American wives left at home had both means and opportunity to commit adultery with less fear than they had in previous wars of consequences such as explaining an illegitimate pregnancy or being left destitute by an angry husband. The Census Bureau also reported a rise in divorce rates following the war, and letters to soldiers from wives confessing their infidelity and often seeking an end to the marriage became so common that they were dubbed "Dear Johns" by Rochester, New York newspaper *Democrat & Chronicle* in 1945.

It is not a fluke that Jessica's zombification in the film occurs on the very night that she had planned to leave Paul with Wesley. As Mrs. Rand tells Betsy, Jessica was tearing her family apart with her "beauty" and her "smile" (the choice weapons of a seductress), so a higher power working through Mrs. Rand determined that she should be punished for her actions. Additionally, even though Wesley dies along with Jessica in the end, the film makes it quite

⁷ In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hester Prynne is sent to America by her European husband who then fails to join her. In his absence, Hester conceives a child that cannot possibly be her husband's and is ostracized for her adultery by the townspeople of 17th century Boston.

clear that his only crime was being weak; in a voice-over at the end, the audience hears a prayer for Jessica's soul, calling her a "wicked woman" who was "dead in her own life...dead in the selfishness of her spirit" and who lured Wesley into her web of sin, as it was "her steps [that] led him down to evil." Both lovers must die for what they did, but only Jessica must be zombified first, because hers is the true crime of the times: she married Paul for reasons other than love, seduced his brother, tore apart a family, and planned to desert her husband despite his insistence that she remain at his side. She is unfaithful, unwilling to follow her husband's wishes, and unconcerned with the preservation of marriage or the family unit, which makes her the on-screen embodiment of the worst fears of a married man serving during World War II and requires that she be stripped of her ability to inflict damage.

1.5 Becoming the Monster

The Haitian *Zombi* continued well into the next several decades, sometimes featuring the female zombie-as-sex-object, and later evolving into the product of an evil leader attempting to create an army to do his evil bidding (as seen, for example, in Nazi zombie movies). While the true villain in the original Haitian *Zombi* narratives is the *bokor*, however, we begin to see a shift in this perception and an attempt to situate the monstrosity onto the *zombi* itself; Jessica Holland, for example, is presented as having laid the foundation for her own fate. In his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre addresses Europeans (or colonizers), himself included, instructing them to,

[O]pen this book, look inside. After taking a short walk in the night you will see strangers gathered around a fire, get closer and listen....They might see you, but they will go on talking among themselves without even lowering their voices. Their indifference strikes home: their fathers, creatures living in the shadows, *your* creatures, were dead souls; you afforded them light, you were their sole interlocutor, you did not take the trouble to answer the zombies. The sons ignore you. The fire that warms and enlightens them is

not yours. You, standing at a respectful distance, you now feel eclipsed, nocturnal, and numbed. It's your turn now. In the darkness that will dawn into another day, you have turned into the zombie. (xlvi)

When Americans became colonizers and occupied Haiti, what they took back home was the legacy of the zombie. They made it their own, significantly altered from the Haitian *Zombi*, and used it to project their own fears onto. When they did so, however, the zombie itself became as much of a monster as its creator. Sartre further advises the Europeans to "[t]ake advantage" of their turn as outsiders in the darkness (which he suggests they are when reading Fanon's book) "to discover your true self as an object" (xlviii). When Americans looked at the Haitian *Zombi* and saw how it might apply to themselves as object, the on-screen zombie became something else entirely, gradually evolving into the Extraterrestrial Zombie.

CHAPTER 2

THE EXTRATERRESTRIAL ZOMBIE: BECOMING DEATH, THE DESTROYER OF WORLDS

As long as they can think, we'll have our problems. But those whom we're using cannot think. They are the dead, brought to assimilated life by our electrode guns. You know, it's an interesting thing when you consider the Earth people who can think are so frightened by those who cannot: the dead.

Plan 9 From Outer Space, 1959

The level of mysterious radiation continues to increase steadily. So long as this situation remains, government spokesmen warn that dead bodies will continue to be transformed into the flesh-eating ghouls. All persons who die during this crisis, from whatever cause, will come back to life to seek human victims.

Night of the Living Dead, 1968

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the world witnessed the only two nuclear wartime attacks to date: the bombings of the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki by American troops. Although the exact human consequences of these attacks were unknown at the time, it became clear over the following years that this was more than just an evolutionary step in wartime machinery; this was an entirely new epoch in human experience. In a television broadcast in 1965, twenty years after the fact, American physicist and “father of the atomic bomb” J. Robert Oppenheimer eloquently captured the sentiment that had begun to emerge amongst many Americans at the time as he somberly reflected on the Trinity bomb testing only weeks before the assault on Japan:

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, “Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.

Early on, the American public not only approved of the use of the bomb but even embraced and celebrated it. As Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster write in their chronicle *The Century*, the American people “agreed that [the bomb] had hastened the end of [World War II] and, in doing

so, saved many more lives on the American side than it had taken from the Japanese”; in fact, “[t]here had even been some early giddiness about the atomic age,” examples of which include marketing of an “atomic cocktail” served at the Washington Press Club, an “atomic ring” offered by the General Mills cereal company in exchange for box tops, and popular “atomic earrings” shaped like mushroom clouds (291). This attitude, however, began to subside with the publication of an August 31, 1946, issue of the *New Yorker*, which featured an article by John Hersey entailing the stories of six survivors of the two bombs. The magazine completely sold out and even became a best-selling book, thus reaching thousands of people, and Hersey’s prose left no room for fanciful notions about the bomb; it included such explicit descriptions as “their faces were wholly burned, their eye sockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks” (qtd. in Jennings 292). With these revelations, the American populace could no longer claim in good conscience that the atomic bomb was just the next logical step in weaponry; this was entirely new and uncharted territory, the larger effects of which were unimaginable and terrifying.

Initially, Americans took some solace in knowing that theirs was the only country in possession of such technology, but they knew that it was only a matter of time before another country developed atomic power or something perhaps even more devastating. As President Harry S. Truman told the nation in a radio address on August 9, 1945:

I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb....But we knew that our enemies were on the search for it. We know now how close they were to finding it. And we knew the disaster which would come to this nation, and to all peace-loving nations, to all civilization, if they had found it first....The atomic bomb is too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world....It is an awful responsibility which has come to us.

For the first time, people considered the “very real possibility of human extinction” if nuclear weapons technology should fall into the hands of the “lawless world” rather than “civilization” (Jennings 292; Truman). Japan and the other Axis powers had been defeated in the war and

had to rebuild, making them less threatening to the United States, which was quickly emerging as one of the most powerful nations in the world. Despite their temporary alliance during World War II, however, “civilization” (or “us,” the United States and the Capitalist world) very quickly remembered that the “lawless world” (“them”) also included the Communist world; most notably, the United States’ ideological opposite and rival world power, the Soviet Union. For the next forty-five years, these two nations engaged in the Cold War, keeping neck and neck with their technological advances in their mutual attempt to trump each other.

Competitive weapons research expanded to include the Space Race, and fear that the “enemy” was always watching and always one step ahead only increased. This also brought another fear into the light: fear that, if humans were reaching into space, something unknown and unexpected could reach back. Common themes that appeared in Cold War-era films included a threat from an unseen enemy, often hidden in plain sight (fostered by the idea of Soviet spies infiltrating the United States and by witnessing the effects of invisible killers like excessive radiation) and the possibility of worldwide destruction (either by human hands or by something that came from off this planet and could not be controlled). Because what had begun as an ideological conflict became so heavily entangled with ever-changing technology (and potential technology), the most popular site for these narratives became the science fiction genre. These themes were especially prevalent in “creature features,” because, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen states in his fifth thesis in his article “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible” (12). In the majority of Cold-War Era creature features, the monster poses a threat to the human race as a whole (or at the very least, a large group of humans) and emerges as the product of extraterrestrial contact of some kind (intelligent life form or celestial body) or humans’ tampering with nature, almost always specifically related to the effects of nuclear experimentation. And these Cold War-Era creature features typically shared a common message: “that curiosity is more often punished than

rewarded, that one is better off safely contained within one's own domestic sphere⁸," and that "[t]o step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (Cohen 12). The monster films from this time period almost unanimously imply that, Communists or no, nuclear experimentation and space exploration may have consequences that the audience cannot yet fully comprehend, prevent, or combat.

2.1 The Otherwordly *Bokor*: Making the Extraterrestrial Zombie

While the Haitian *Zombi* still made occasional appearances in Cold War-Era creature features, a new kind of zombie began to dominate the silver screen during this time. American anxieties about nuclear weapons, space, potential Soviet victory or infiltration and the spread of Communism, and tensions amongst Americans themselves all combined to form the zombie that this chapter will refer to as the Extraterrestrial Zombie. In Extraterrestrial Zombie films, the zombifying agent is not a *bokor* uttering enchantments over a potion made of puffer fish and human remains, but rather an extraterrestrial force such as an alien assault, a meteor strike, or radiation from a space craft or celestial body. Much like the Haitian *Zombi*, this new zombie is resurrected from the grave,⁹ typically silent and slow-moving, and no longer capable of normal human interaction. Unlike the Haitian *Zombi*, however, these zombies are brought back en masse and with an uncontrollable hunger or vengeful desire usually resulting in murder and/or cannibalism. Their bloody story typically takes place in the United States rather than in the Caribbean, often in a small "any town," thus bringing the fears projected onto these zombie stories much closer to home than previously.

Just as the Haitian *Zombi* had evolved from the subordinate population's very real fear of being fully dominated, mid-twentieth century American filmmakers put forth a zombie that

⁸ Cohen states that the "domestic sphere," the border of which the monster is policing, can be "intellectual, geographic, or sexual" (12).

⁹ As the previous chapter states, victims of Haitian zombification are buried and later pulled from their graves; whether or not they are dead or just seemingly dead, however, is specific to the story. The Extraterrestrial Zombie is always dead.

captured those fears for their particular audience. Apart from the causal extraterrestrial threat, these films showcase fear of nuclear experimentation and a realization that, despite enjoying a position of power within the world, the United States could still fall under the control of a more advanced world power or extraterrestrial life form. Civil rights movements all over the globe forced Americans to see the subjugation already occurring within their country. While not subordinated as a whole, subordination and othering of certain populations based on such factors as race and gender, even within what President Truman referred to as “peace-loving nations” such as the United States, were on display in all their ugliness. Some creature features showed monsters very different from humans, but, in addition to having the “us”/Americans versus “them”/“the lawless world” (i.e., Communist) narrative, the quest for racial and gender equality made it apparent that “us”/Americans broke down into “us”/middle- to upper-class white heterosexual males and a broken “them” comprised of various groups excluded from the first. Perhaps this internal dynamic made zombies the perfect monster representation for this time period; after all, they were human, American, and sometimes even former friends or loved ones of the protagonists, but they were still “them.”

2.2 Challenging the Zombie Canon: The Extraterrestrial Zombie versus the Romero Zombie

Because American director George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* is the most famous (and the first real success story) of the Extraterrestrial Zombie films, it is often credited as being the first of its kind, and several zombie theorists have classified the entire zombie film canon according to Romero's contribution to the genre. These critics suggest three distinctions for zombie films: pre-Romero, or all zombie films created from 1932 (*White Zombie*) up to 1968 (*Night of the Living Dead*); the Romero trilogy (the original versions of *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead*), 1968 to 1985; and post-Romero, or those created after *Day of the Dead* in 1985.¹⁰ This categorization method is not inclusive enough for a

¹⁰ See Zachary Graves, *Zombies: The Complete Guide to the World of the Living Dead*, and Nick Muntean and Matthew Thomas Payne, “Attack of the Livid Dead: Recalibrating Terror in the Post-September 11 Zombie Film.”

number of reasons; most prominently, it does not even allow a place for over a hundred other non-Romero zombie films created between 1968 and 1985.¹¹ Additionally, several films preceding *Night of the Living Dead* display characteristics that make them distinctly different from Haitian *Zombi* films and require a new category. Given the similarities between these earlier films and *Night*, “Extraterrestrial Zombie” is a more accurate and comprehensive descriptor.

Apart from overlooking some of the significant evolutions that take place over the course of the American zombie film genre, the zombie as film monster is defined within this system only by its relationship to Romero. While few zombie film connoisseurs would argue that Romero’s contribution to the genre was anything less than epic, as his original trilogy has inspired remakes, tributes, and entire zombie cultural experiences such as “zombie crawls” that tend to attract mostly “purists” (or those adhering strictly to the Romero model), defining the zombie film in this way removes its Haitian origins and fails to give credit where credit is due.¹²

Most importantly, however, while *Night of the Living Dead* was the first Extraterrestrial Zombie film to find much commercial and critical success, it was not the first to present the zombie as defined in this chapter. As author Joe Kane points out in his book *Night of the Living Dead: Behind the Scenes of the Most Terrifying Zombie Movie Ever*, director Edward D. Wood, Jr.’s *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) was the first film that “merged zombies with a more contemporary trauma, the ever-present alien threat” (4). While there was a 1952 serial entitled *Zombies of the Stratosphere*, which has to do with Martians attacking Earth, zombies do not appear anywhere but in the title. *Creature With the Atom Brain* (1955) introduces corpses animated by atomic power, but because this power is wielded by humans hoping to use the zombies as slaves, this film still technically qualifies as a Haitian *Zombi* film. *Invisible Invaders*, also released in 1959, has a similar plot to that of *Plan 9*: aliens show up wanting Earthlings to

¹¹ See *Zombie Movie Database*.

¹² Ironically, this characterization is perhaps darkly appropriate (and a symptom of the larger problem), since the Haitian *Zombi*’s story involves the stripping of power, agency, and identity of a socially “inferior” person by a “superior” person, and this categorization makes Romero, a white American, distinctly “superior” and even the basis for the entire zombie film canon, thus rendering the Haitian *Zombi* essentially nameless.

surrender their nuclear weapons for the good of the universe, and their methods of persuasion include inhabiting the bodies of humans so that they can control them. *Plan 9*, however, was actually written and produced in 1956 but remained unreleased for three years (Kane 4). Given its prior production, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* claims the distinction of the being the first Extraterrestrial Zombie film.

2.3 Because the First Eight Plans Didn't Include Zombies: The Alien Colonizer and *Plan 9 From Outer Space*

Next to the Romero trilogy, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is perhaps the most culturally significant of the Extraterrestrial Zombie films, as it is one of the most widely known. Its continued cult following over the years, however, has less to do with the quality of the film and more to do with its distinction as the movie commonly known as the “Worst Film of All Time,” a title given to it in 1980 by film critics Michael and Harry Medved, who also named Wood the Worst Director of All Time. In spite of this, *Plan 9* is not without its merits. In addition to having a script that is just awful enough to be slightly entertaining, the story is a prime example of the well-intentioned (but still intrusive and threatening) alien colonizer that University of Arizona scholar Greg Grewell writes about in his article “Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future.”¹³ Grewell suggests that nearly all twentieth century science fiction “produced largely by colonizing Europeans and Americans” adheres to a colonial model with several possible plots, all involving clashes of civilizations, because this narrative is essentially all these two groups know (26). He discusses an 1882 *Atlantic Monthly* article (“How Can the American Savage be Civilized?” by United States Lieutenant George S. Wilson) and the 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day*, suggesting that the two have one vital thing in common: “the fear of colonization, which for the most part informs the whole of the science fiction industry’s productions” (26). Wilson’s text, which describes three possible courses of

¹³ Significantly, this article was published in 2001, before, as I will argue in my next chapter, the zombie genre (as well as other science fiction) makes another major shift in its form.

action¹⁴ that American settlers might take in their interactions with the native populations, also addresses the possibility of having “some superior race...come from another planet” and “find us as inferior and barbarous, according to their standard, as we consider the Indians, when measured by our standards” (qtd. in Grewell 25). In this scenario, Wilson notes that the invading population’s intentions will undoubtedly be colonization (drawing from his own experience as a member of a “superior race”), and that the most effective method for preventing colonization of Earth will be a violent insurrection; recognizing, however, that this might also be a possible course of action that the native Amerindian populations might take and perhaps hoping to avoid karmic repercussions, he advocates establishing reservations (“the kinder, gentler, safer policy”) as the official American policy toward the indigenous peoples (Grewell 25). Even with more than a century’s distance and in a theoretically less colonial-minded America, however, the film *Independence Day* depicts exactly the scenario suggested by Wilson, as do many other Euro-American science fiction films and texts from the twentieth century.

Grewell points to the familiar trope of extraterrestrials or monsters as the “Other” and writes that there are two basic plots for these stories and films: the first dealing with the Other on Earth, and the second dealing with Earthlings venturing into space and encountering the Other (27). In nearly every case, the population doing the space traveling has colonial aspirations, seeking to either establish a new home or exploit available resources, and, while these are sometimes intended as friendly missions, more often than not, they either end in some sort of violent misunderstanding or begin with the intent of one population to enslave or destroy the other population. Perhaps because of its correlation to the slave metaphor seen in the Haitian *zombi*, this type of narrative can be seen in numerous mid- to late-twentieth century zombie films, in which Earthlings find themselves the zombified victims of a more technologically advanced invading extraterrestrial population. This is the case in Wood’s *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. Although, as Grewell points out, these aliens are unusual in that they start

¹⁴ Wilson suggests that the United States must either “exterminate the savages,” “let them alone,” or “accept them as dependents of the government” (qtd. in Grewell 25).

out as “well-meaning, friendly beings who drop by to help the inhabitants of earth mature” or “become universal citizens” (27), things do not go according to plan, forcing the extraterrestrials to take literal control over (dead) humans in an attempt to push their own agenda.

The viewer learns early on in the film that the United States Army has known for some time about the existence of flying saucers that have suddenly begun making daytime appearances over Hollywood; the government, however, has taken steps to keep the public from having this knowledge. Through conversations between soldiers, it becomes clear that the aliens have attempted on multiple occasions to make contact with government leaders (unsuccessfully, we assume at this point), but that the army became hostile when the beings “attacked a town.” This event is not public knowledge, though, because “it was covered up by the higher echelon,” seeing as “flying saucers...are still a rumor—officially.” At this point, the viewer can assume that the aliens are hostile beings, responsible for the deaths of the inhabitants of an entire town and bent on annihilating the human race. Given the events of the film to this point, the cultural understanding of colonization, and the familiar plotline, established by H.G. Wells in his 1898 novel *War of the Worlds* and popularized by both radio and film adaptations prior to *Plan 9*'s production, this seems to be a safe assumption.

The audience soon learns, however, that this is not exactly the case. In an office at the Pentagon, viewers get a glimpse of what the problem might be in communication between Earthlings and their visitors. An army general admits to a man identified as Colonel Edwards that the extraterrestrials have been sending radio transmissions but that government labs had to create “a language computer” in order to interpret them. When he plays the transmission for Edwards, the audience hears Eros, a space soldier, state:

We do not want to conquer your planet, only save it. We could have destroyed it long ago if that had been our aim....I admit, we have had to take certain means which you might refer to as criminal. That is because of your big governments, which have destroyed some of our representatives....If [the people of Earth] do not want us on

friendly terms, we then have no alternative but to destroy you before you destroy us. With your ignorant, juvenile minds, you have developed explosives too fast for your planet to conceive of what you are doing. You are on the verge of destroying the entire universe.

While Eros does not articulate the exact nature of his plan for destruction, his reasoning is plain: his is a more advanced civilization, which feels that the people of Earth have hastily developed and utilized nuclear weapons without being fully aware of the consequences. Earth is jeopardizing not only its own civilization but others as well. As Wilson wrote with regard to the Amerindian populations, the “superior race” has determined that the population of Earth is “inferior and barbarous,” and, even though they had hoped that it would not become violent, that race has decided to take drastic measures in order to insure its own safety. The audience never learns exactly why the government has not responded to the previous messages or has “destroyed some of [the extraterrestrials] representatives” (assuming that Eros is being truthful when he indicates that the aliens did not resort to violence until after the Earthlings did), but clearly a language barrier is not to blame, since this transmission has been translated into plain English; nevertheless, the general orders Edwards to “see what in hell it is that they want.” Although the script is admittedly simplistic at best, giving Wood (who was both director and writer for this film) the benefit of the doubt that he made these dialogue choices deliberately, we can see that the army general (who clearly speaks English) is either hard of hearing or hopes to negotiate something other than giving up the world’s explosives, which he does not see as an option. His conversation with Edwards, whom he does not have trouble understanding, seems to indicate that his hearing is intact, so the viewer is left to assume that he has no intention of offering up the nuclear weapons.

Neither Eros’s statement about their probability of destroying the universe nor the general’s response to that statement would likely come as a surprise to an American audience in 1959; Americans lived in fear of a nuclear apocalypse but also feared that giving up their own

nuclear weapons would leave them vulnerable to attack. After all, their own presidents had been telling them for years that an atomic bomb was “harnessing the basic power of the universe,”¹⁵ that the damage inflicted by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was “only a small fraction of what would happen to the world in a third World War,”¹⁶ and that “the retaliation capabilities of the United States [were] so great that...an aggressor’s land would be laid waste.”¹⁷ While many Americans were terrified of the possibility of a nuclear winter and adamant about regulation of the weapons by the United Nations, even President Dwight D. Eisenhower made it clear while addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy in 1953 that this regulation was more for other nations (namely, the Soviet Union) than for his. Given the actual government stance on nuclear weapons since their first use fourteen years prior to *Plan 9*’s release, the Pentagon scene and the general’s remarks did have some cultural resonance: possibility of universal destruction or no, the United States was not prepared to hand over its weapons.

While the aliens’ wishes are clear and culturally recognizable, their actual plan for bringing about their choice scenario comes with more than a few flaws and steers the film in the direction of the culturally expected (and Wilson-recommended) Earthling uprising and triumph. The audience first sees the aliens on their ship, where a male soldier (Eros) and female soldier (Tanna) have come to report to their superior. Perhaps it is because the film lacked much budget for special effects and costumes, or perhaps it is because Wood wants the audience to be conflicted about whether to sympathize with the Earthlings or the aliens (which he seems to indicate with some of his dialogue), but the interplanetary travelers look a lot like average white Americans who speak English but wear shiny clothes, make strange hand gestures, and occasionally (but not consistently) use strange words for numbers. They reveal that they have opted to go ahead with “Plan 9” because the previous eight plans presumably failed and

¹⁵ See President Harry S. Truman’s public statement announcing the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

¹⁶ See President Truman’s radio address to the American people on August 9, 1945.

¹⁷ See President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” speech, given before the General Assembly of the United Nations on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy on December 8, 1953.

brought them to the conclusion that it is “absolutely impossible to work through these Earth creatures”; Plan 9, we soon learn, involves resurrecting the dead using “long-distance electrodes shot in the pineal and pituitary glands.” Having decided that reasoning with the Earthlings is futile, they opt instead to control the dead (since the souls of the living are “too controlled” already), hoping that by creating enough “ghouls,” as they call them, they might “march them on the capitols of Earth” to show its residents that they mean business.

In theory, Plan 9 has some merit: the walking dead are murderous (although they tend to strangle their victims rather than eat them), they offer evidence that these aliens have the capability to control the dead human body (which begs the question as to whether or not they might be able to control a live human at some point), and they have the added scare factor of being recently deceased locals, which makes them familiar and situates the threat so that it comes from within “us”/Earthlings, albeit under the control of “them”/aliens. In practice, however, this is not an especially workable plan. The aliens (who seem to be only three in number) have also only managed to raise three ghouls, bringing them to a grand total of six warriors for their cause, and to top that off, the aliens seem reluctant to do any actual killing themselves, and sometimes their electrode guns jam, causing the ghouls to turn on their creators. While a viewer might wonder what, exactly, is so terrifying about this tiny army, especially since the ghouls usually “attack” (by which I mean that, apart from the occasional strangulation, they slowly and silently approach people with menacing faces and cause them to fall to the ground and shriek hysterically) by themselves, they evidently cannot be stopped by any human weapons, and the aliens have also come equipped with a “decomposition ray” that turns the ghouls instantly into skeletons. Suspension of disbelief is key when watching this film; although this does not have the enormous and immediate impact that the aliens had anticipated, by some fortuitous circumstance, the private dwelling that they happen to have sent one of the ghouls into had Colonel Edwards as a visitor, and the sight of the skeletal remains of the ghoul does actually succeed in terrifying Edwards and an airline pilot onto one of the spacecrafts to hear the aliens

out. In a lengthy and cheesy monologue, Eros informs the Earthlings that, since they have now discovered atomic and hydrogen bombs, “the only explosion left is the solarmanite,” which “is a way to explode the actual particles of sunlight” and, ipso facto, the sun itself and all that its light touches. The aliens have known about this for centuries, but the knowledge is not dangerous in their hands because they are not “stupid,” “headstrong,” and “violent,” as they believe the Earthlings are (a belief only strengthened by the pilot, who suggests that if the United States had the “solanite” bomb, “we’d be even a stronger nation than now!”).

Given that they do make several valid points, express regret that the situation has to become deadly, and look and talk just like Earthlings, a viewer already fearful of a nuclear apocalypse runs the risk of siding with the aliens. A 1959 American audience, however, would have been torn between those fears and the need to feel strength in patriotism and unity during a hectic time in their nation, as *Plan 9* debuted just after the end of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Communist “witch hunts” and during the early years of the Vietnam War. These factors, combined with the Hays Code’s¹⁸ decree that criminal actions (such as the murder of Earthlings) could not elicit sympathy from the audience, required that the aliens be presented in an unflattering light and that they lose in the end. Wood’s script does not sully their views, but it does give them two deal-breaking qualities near the end of the film; after having their plan called “mad” by the Earthlings, the female alien soldier goes off on an anti-war rant, and Eros yells at her to stop talking and pushes her away. The pilot, whose previous interactions with the aliens cast him as ignorant and impulsive, now becomes a hero when he takes a swing at Eros for having handled the lady in this way. Despite the fact that Eros and Tanna are dressed identically and have, up to this point, appeared to have identical job descriptions (and despite the fact that hers is the strongest female role in the film, as the non-alien female characters have done nothing but scream, faint, and wait to be rescued by men), Eros exclaims, “In my mind, women are for advancing the race, not for fighting men’s battles. Life is not so expensive

¹⁸ The Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code, censored the content of American films produced between 1930 and 1968 based upon a strict set of moral guidelines. The full text can be found at ArtsReformation.com.

on my planet. We don't cling to it like you do. Our entire aim is for the development of our planet." In this single scene, Wood tries to sell the audience on the idea that the seemingly reasonable aliens are actually male-chauvinist socialists, who have no respect for women and push the development of the race as a whole at the expense of individuals. At this point, it becomes theoretically safe for viewers to realign themselves with the Earthlings, who, they can reason, might be on the verge of igniting the entire universe but at least have a healthy appreciation for individual life and do not advocate physical abuse of women.

With everyone presumably now in agreement that it is better to be blown up than to side with the crazy and violent alien invaders, the audience can now appreciate the Earthling "uprising" that occurs in the film's final four minutes, when the pilot and Colonel Edwards manage to muscle their way off the ship, setting it on fire in the process and stopping the aliens' evil plans. The two remaining ghouls turn into skeletons, rendering them no longer a threat, and, as the Earthlings stand around watching the ship explode, Edwards says, "We've got to hand it to them, though—they're far ahead of us." In spite of the Hays-friendly victorious ending, this line reminds the viewer of the possibility that the aliens could have won, as they are still, technologically speaking, the "superior race." *Plan 9* introduces an important transitional step in zombie evolution: it fully embraces the colonial zombie narrative on American soil, where the zombifying agent presents a widespread threat (or at least a more widespread threat than that posed by a *bokor*), and it introduces the possibility that the colonizer could be overpowered by a "superior race."

2.4 "They're Coming to Get You, Barbara!": The Extraterrestrial Zombie as Predator in *Night of the Living Dead*

Even though it is not the first film to blend the extraterrestrial with the zombie, part of the reasoning for classifying zombie films according to their relationship to the original Romero trilogy comes from the indisputable fact that *Night of the Living Dead* is distinctly different from every zombie movie that preceded it, including other Extraterrestrial Zombie films. This can be

attributed to several factors, not the least of which are George A. Romero's direction and John Russo's script; more objective factors, however, include, among other things, the year of its production. In 1968, the Hays Code for American cinema was replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film rating system, which assigned appropriate ratings based upon content rather than strictly censoring it, thus opening up a new world of possibilities for what could be shown on screen. This year was also the peak year for American involvement in the Vietnam War, the year of the Tet Offensive, and the year that anti-war riots broke out at the Democratic National Convention. With war consuming the minds of the country, visual electronic media were forever changed when Vietnam became the first war with nationally televised footage beginning in 1965. Because Americans had become accustomed to seeing the horrors of war from their living rooms, understandings of what was and what was not appropriate to show on camera changed, bringing along with it a shared sentiment of jaded disenchantment amongst many viewers.

In her 1996 article "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film," Isabel Pinedo argues that 1968 marks a split in the film horror genre that came as the result of this new public mindset. She maps out a timeline of the American horror film, where the earliest films typically "distanced their monsters from everyday life by locating them in an exotic time or place," and the monster gradually moves closer and closer to home (contemporary America) but still retains distanced origins as "a supernatural or alien invader, a deviant transformation from within, a psychotic, or a combination of these forms" (19-20).¹⁹ According to Pinedo, this shift culminates in a "stress break, not the result of an originary traumatic event but the cumulative outcome of repetitive historical stresses," and she locates the breaking point at the release of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). From the moment of the break, forward, "the inefficacy of human action and the repudiation of narrative closure combine to produce various forms of the open ending," which she lists as the monster's triumph, the

¹⁹ My view coincides with Pinedo's to this point; however, as I will argue in my next chapter, the monster's origins eventually cease to be exotic, removed, or even "deviant" and become a worldwide problem caused directly by human action.

monster's temporary defeat (which typically leads to horror film chains such as *Halloween* wherein the monster continues to terrorize), or an uncertain outcome (which is the case in *Night of the Living Dead*) (Pinedo 19-20). Everything prior to *Night* she refers to as "classical horror," and everything since, she classifies as "postmodern horror" (17). She characterizes the postmodern world as

an unstable one in which traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, master narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read: male, white, married, heterosexual) subject deteriorates. Mastery is lost, universalizing grand theory is discredited, and the stable, unified, coherent self acquires the status of fiction. (17-18)

Her description certainly fits with what Romero states was his intent in constructing *Night* the way that he did; when asked by writer Joe Kane for the 2010 book *Night of the Living Dead: Behind the Scenes of the Most Terrifying Zombie Movie Ever*, Romero reports that he had difficulty finding a distributor to carry his film because everyone dies at the end of the movie, and potential distributors wanted the ending changed so that at the very least, the protagonist, Ben, would survive. Because Romero wanted to make plain that "the redneck posse led by Sherriff McClelland" that ultimately mistakes Ben for a zombie and shoots him "represented *not* the cavalry riding to the last-reel rescue but yet another force of chaos and destruction," he refused to alter the ending (Kane 76). In the interview with Kane, he provided the reasoning behind deciding to have Ben killed by his would-be rescuers:

We didn't *want* to restore order. The whole reason for doing the piece is to kick 'normal' in the butt. I've never understood why you'd want to bring things back to normal after you've upset the apple cart that much....My biggest complaint about horror, about fantasy cinema, usually is that you do it to upset the way of the world. And then, traditionally, in the end you sort of restore it all. And you say, 'Well, why the hell did we go through it in the first place?' (qtd. in Kane 76)

As Pinedo suggests, this ending is a collapse of the master narrative and a breakdown of traditional categories, which characterizes the subsequent trend in horror films.

Another breakdown introduced by *Night* is the breaching of the taboo of cannibalism. Although Romero's film is not the first to show zombies as a threat to living humans, his unprecedented graphic displays of humans eating other humans paved the way for hundreds of zombie films to follow. In devising this story, Romero and Russo did not invent this concept; in fact, they claim inspiration from, among other things, the 1964 film *The Last Man on Earth*, based upon Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, wherein a plague of vampirism spreads throughout the world (Kane 7), and mythology from all over the planet reveals a long-standing fear of the dead returning from the grave to prey on the living. The first known reference to a cannibalistic zombie-like creature dates back more than 4000 years to Tablet VI of the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when the vengeful goddess Ishtar says to her father Anu that, if she does not get her way, "I will knock down the Gates of the Netherworld, / I will smash the door posts, and leave the doors flat down, / and will let the dead go up to eat the living! / And the dead will outnumber the living!" (lines 89-92). Stories of the Arab *ghoul*,²⁰ the Scandinavian *draugr*,²¹ and the Western European *revenant*,²² among others, show similar themes.

Documented history even provides inspiration: in the 1950s, the Fore tribe of Papua New Guinea experienced an outbreak of an incurable neurodegenerative disease known as kuru. A relative of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (more commonly known as Mad Cow Disease), the disease affects humans and other primates and progresses in three stages over the course of three to twenty-four months, following a lengthy asymptomatic incubation period (ranging between five and sixty years). Kuru, also known as "the laughing disease" or "the shivers," causes air pockets to form in the brain. Symptoms of the first stage include headaches

²⁰ First referenced in *One Thousand and One Nights*.

²¹ See Bob Curran's *Vampires: A Field Guide to the Creatures that Stalk the Night* (2005).

²² See William of Newburgh's *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, Book V, Chapters 22 – 24, and Walter Map's *De nugis curialium*, both dating back to 12th century England.

and joint pain, followed by “unsteadiness in standing or walking,” which worsens with time, leading to a “broad-based gait,” “reeling instability,” and “flinging arm movements” (Collinge). Patients then develop tremors, slurred speech, and increasing loss of muscle control. In the second stage, muscle coordination continues to deteriorate, eye movements become jerky and uncontrolled, and patients suffer from photosensitivity, depression, and uncontrollable bursts of laughter. By the third stage, the patient is unable to sit, stand, speak, or swallow, and often develops oozing sores over much of the body. Death usually occurs as the result of respiratory failure, bronchopneumonia, or septicemia.²³ Kuru patients and Romero’s zombies have more than just physical characteristics (wide, jerky movements, lack of speech and coordination, rotting flesh) in common: like zombies, kuru patients have consumed human flesh. In the case of the Fore tribe, afflicted members contracted the illness from their tribal practice of endocannibalism, wherein the tribe consumed the flesh of deceased members with the belief that this would retain the individual’s life force within the tribe.

In addition to breaking away from the traditional master narrative and portraying on screen a societal fear spanning the globe and dating back thousands of years, *Night*’s often indirect but incredibly raw handling of contemporary societal concerns also sets it apart from previous Extraterrestrial Zombie films. The film obviously does address the extraterrestrial concerns, but not in so blatant a manner as *Plan 9*. For the early part of the movie, the glassy-eyed, flesh hungry attackers seem to come out of nowhere, with no explanation whatsoever. Although the characters (and the audience) do hear the occasional snippet of a radio or television report speculating about the cause and exact nature of the “mass murders,” as the reporters are calling the attacks, half the movie passes before any definitive information emerges. At this point, a television news broadcaster states that the murders, “incredible as they seem, are not the results of mass hysteria.” He goes on to say that early eyewitness accounts had previously been dismissed by authorities as being exaggerations but that “medical

²³ See “A clinical study of kuru patients with long incubation periods at the end of the epidemic in Papua New Guinea” (2008) by John Collinge, et al.

evaluations of some of the victims bore out the fact that they had been partially devoured.” After reading a statement from National Civil Defense Headquarters in Washington that announces that “persons who have recently died have been returning to life and committing acts of murder,” he backtracks on the advice previously issued on the news that people should stay inside behind locked doors and announces the “official” plan, which involves getting quickly to safety at an armed rescue station. No official cause for the anomaly has yet been released by the government, but reporters have learned that NASA scientists were called in by government officials, which leads to speculation that “the recent Explorer Satellite shot to Venus” might be to blame. Broadcasters reveal that the satellite “orbited Venus and then was purposely destroyed by NASA when scientists discovered it was carrying a mysterious high level radiation with it.” The general consensus, although the interviewed officials refuse to comment on it, is that the radiation could have caused mutations in the unburied dead.

Unlike *Plan 9, Night* does not make this a central part of the plot, and Romero never provides the cheesy and far-from-subtle commentary that Wood does; this information is unconfirmed and comes from a television report, which the characters continually interrupt with bickering so that the audience misses pieces of information. After hearing the report, the characters do not comment on or seem to care about the origins of the creatures, which makes the situation all the more terrifying because they are clearly in full crisis mode, hoping only to make it to a rescue station and more concerned with arguing amongst themselves about the best way to get there than with railing about the folly of mankind's arrogance and the negative repercussions of technology, as Wood's aliens do. Romero plants the fear in a subtle way and does not dwell on the cause of zombification, but in handling the subject the way he does, viewers already fearful of radiation are forced to realize that, by the time they know the full extent of its effects, it might be much too late, and they might well find themselves in the midst of a crisis like this without even knowing what had hit them until they, like their on-screen counterparts, were in too deep to even care why it was happening.

The other major contemporary issue that Romero indirectly presents was actually never intended to be part of the political commentary of the film but became one of its defining characteristics: the protagonist, Ben, is African-American. Russo and Romero told Joe Kane in 2010 that they had originally written the role of Ben as “unraced” (i.e., “white”) and even had an actor already in mind for the part. During auditions, however, they were most impressed by a black actor named Duane Jones, whom they felt embodied Ben as they saw him. Although they intentionally resisted re-writing the script in order to add racial elements or alter the character in anyway, Jones’s co-star, the late Karl Hardman (“Harry Cooper”) claimed that “[Ben’s] dialogue was that of a lower-class, uneducated person. Duane Jones was a very well-educated man....Duane himself upgraded his own dialogue to reflect how he felt the character should present himself” (qtd. in Kane 32-33). Because the new Ben, while still “earthy and capable” (Kane 32), was considerably more calm and collected than the Ben of the original script, Romero, Russo, and Hardman decided that Hardman should play Harry Cooper “in a frenetic fashion with fist-clenching and that sort of thing, for contrast” (Hardman qtd. in Kane 33).

Ben and Harry vie for the spot of alpha male in both the original script and the film, and the dialogue never contains any overt or intentional reference to race; however, with Jones playing the more sensible and altruistic character and Hardman adapting his character accordingly, “one senses the ever-seething Harry’s unvoiced bigotry,” so that the racial contrast “adds another layer of anger to the pair’s ferocious battles for alpha-dog status” (Kane 34). Their relationship begins with tension when Ben and Barbara learn that Harry, along with his wife Helen, their injured nine-year-old daughter Karen, and a teenaged couple named Tom and Judy have been hiding out for some time in the cellar of the farmhouse that Ben and Barbara have barricaded themselves into; despite hearing Barbara’s screams and the sounds of Ben’s fending off the undead upstairs, under Harry’s direction, they do not emerge to help until the sounds of struggle die down, and then they come out only to look for supplies and try to obtain news from the radio or television. When Ben demands to know why Harry never made an effort

to assist, Harry angrily insists, “We luck into a safe place, and you’re telling us we gotta risk our lives just because somebody might need help, huh?” To this, Ben replies, “Yeah, something like that.” Apart from their differing viewpoints on the safety of the other members of the group, they have very different philosophies as to how they should handle this crisis: Harry wants to remain barricaded in the basement, whereas Ben believes this is a death trap and wants to find a way for everyone to escape from the house. Tom, who expresses interest in working together, attempts to mediate, but the two cannot stop arguing long enough to come to any shared conclusions. Ben tells Harry that, if he is “stupid enough to go die in that trap,” then so be it, but that he is “not stupid enough to follow [Harry].” He follows this with the command to “get the hell down in the cellar,” telling Harry, “You can be the boss down there. I’m boss up here.” At this point, Ben is the one giving orders, which Harry is obliged to follow, however shocked and infuriated, as the order coincides with what he wanted in the first place. When Harry retreats to the cellar, Ben assumes the role of alpha male, now calling the shots for himself, Barbara, and Tom and Judy, who have rejected Harry’s plan in favor of Ben’s. Given Jones’s race, this makes the situation much more intense, as he is now a black man commanding several white people—a situation virtually unheard of in American cinema up to that point.

In a cellar scene, the audience learns that Helen Cooper also shares Ben’s view, and, for his refusal to work with Ben, she attacks her husband’s pride in a passive-aggressive fashion, clearly agitated as she asks him, “That’s important, isn’t it? To be right, everybody else to be wrong?” Although she indicates that she feels that he values his pride and sense of authority over what is actually best for his wife and daughter, she does not overtly resist him until she learns that there is a radio upstairs, at which point, she insists that he “take the boards off that door!...We may not enjoy living together, but dying together isn’t going to solve anything. Those people aren’t our enemies.” In saying this, she attempts to situate him in reality: it does not matter that Harry is not the “boss” of a teenage boy, two women, and a black man, as “them” is now most definitely the zombie, and the living humans in the house are all “us.”

Without race as a contributing factor, this scene could not have been as powerful. There is nothing in the dialogue to directly indicate that Harry's behaviors are at least partly the result of racism; however, because he never clearly states exactly why he is so incredibly opposed to working with Ben, even at the possible expense of his wife's and daughter's lives, a 1968 audience could assume that racism at least figures into his decision. Given the fact that a teenage boy and now three women (including Helen) are all siding with the black man probably also does not help to persuade him; by casting the film in this way, Romero and Russo inadvertently set up a situation wherein the typical leader, the middle-aged, middle-class white man, finds himself squaring off against everyone who would typically be subordinate to him and losing.

Ben's death scene also takes on new significance as a result of Duane Jones's race. Although the original script does call for Ben to be mistaken for a zombie and shot by a sniper in the "rescue posse" led by Sherriff McClelland, the audience would undoubtedly have associated this death with the April 4, 1968, assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., only six months prior to the film's release. In both cases, the heroes' deaths were unprovoked and unexpected, and the assailant was a white sniper (in King's case, white supremacist James Earl Ray). Some viewers might also have associated the hasty actions of the all-white posse, led by an officer of the law, with the often unnecessarily extreme handling of race riots and protests by the police and military.

Although the distributor, Continental, played up the race angle, running *Night* as a double-feature along with the antebellum *Slaves* in 1970 and later with several "blaxploitation" films (Kane 80-81), creating a black hero was never Romero's and Russo's intention; casting Duane Jones in the role of Ben, however, did significantly alter the dynamic and cultural significance of the film. As Russo expressed about the film's continued significance forty years after its production,

[A]ll of us must have a deep-seated fear of being set upon, attacked, by unfeeling, uncaring personages who do not take the time to know and respect, but only to hate us. We all dread the witch hunters, the lynch mob, the terrorists who plant bombs to kill those they have never met. (qtd. in Kane 84)

Romero expands on this, suggesting that one theme in *Night* is "People's inability to communicate." He explains that "the protagonists are in a situation that they could probably easily solve if they would stop fighting among themselves. They cause their own downfall....Tribalism keeps people from the end goal" (qtd. in Kane 84). By adding race to the mix during such a volatile time in American history, that tribalism becomes even more pronounced and forces the audience to consider the potentially deadly consequences of holding fast to prejudiced viewpoints rather than expanding the definition of "us," especially in a dangerous emergency situation like the one presented in *Night of the Living Dead*.

2.5 "Another One For the Fire": The Enduring Legacy of the Extraterrestrial Zombie

At the end of *Night of the Living Dead*, after Ben has been shot by his would-be rescuers, the film cuts to a sequence of grainy still shots not unlike those taken in the Vietnam War. The audience sees the posse hook Ben's body and carry it out to a pile of bodies, with a voice heard over the shots stating, "There's another one for the fire. Hey Randy, light these torches over here!" At this point, the pile goes up in flames. As we see in this sequence, the Extraterrestrial Zombie film introduced to the genre the idea that the hero might not triumph, and that a zombie outbreak might lead to mass carnage right in our own backyards. In this and other films, anxieties also begin to emerge about the possibility of the colonizing population becoming the colonized, of zombies as a potential problem of epic proportions, and of being killed by someone that the victim knew, trusted, or even loved, such as the murderous zombified former police inspector in *Plan 9* or little Karen Cooper, shown feasting on her father's arm, in *Night*. Furthermore, these films revealed the American people's fear and mistrust of advanced

weapons technology and intrusion into outer space. Although all of these concerns existed within American society already, the film industry perhaps exacerbated them by turning them into monsters, perpetuating colonial narratives and the idea of the zombie, who is like “us” but not, as a force of destruction (Grewell 37). These attitudes continued throughout the Cold War and the Vietnam War, and they continue today, where they have evolved one step further into what I will refer to in my next chapter as the Apocalyptic Zombie.

CHAPTER 3

THE APOCALYPTIC ZOMBIE: AVOID IT LIKE THE PLAGUE THAT IT IS

Social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent.

I Am Legend, 2007

They're not gonna let us out of here alive, are they?

Quarantine, 2008

It's a perfect, beautiful morning, and this is our home. This is where we were gonna raise our baby. Everyone we know is dead. This town is dead, and it's not coming back. It's never coming back.

The Crazies, 2010

Just before nine on a Tuesday morning in September of 2001, an airplane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York. Morning news anchors speculated about how such an accident could have occurred, what the size of the plane was, how much damage the structure might have sustained, and how many casualties there might be. To fill the space as they filmed the smoke pouring out of the tower and waited for information, the anchors reminded viewers that the World Trade Center had opened in 1973 and had been the site of a bombing twenty years later. As they were filming, a second plane crashed into the South Tower. Although it seems obvious in hindsight that this was the second hit of a terrorist attack, anchors and reporters continued to speculate. A caller providing information for *The Today Show* wondered aloud if air traffic control might be experiencing some difficulties, and Matt Lauer contemplated the odds of two planes hitting the towers on the same day. Despite having mentioned the bombing eight years earlier, reporters were still not talking terrorism. An hour and two more plane crashes later, however, it became obvious that this was a carefully orchestrated terrorist assault.

Within days, Americans went from a nation of people unable to immediately wrap their minds around the idea that they were under attack to people who confiscated tweezers and shampoo from anyone boarding a flight for fear that these everyday toiletries might be used in a

terrorist plot. Even the military was unprepared and unable to reach the third and fourth flights in time; as journalist Steven Hendrix writes in a *Washington Post* article dated September 8, 2011, the United States Air Force went from having “no armed aircraft standing by” to quickly dispatching fighter pilots without live ammunition, charged with bringing down any suspect aircrafts at any cost. Lt. Heather Penney recalls, “We wouldn’t be shooting it down. We’d be ramming the aircraft. I would essentially be a kamikaze pilot” (qtd. in Hendrix). Americans went from unsuspecting to paranoid in almost no time at all. A shared public panic emerged from the media treatment of the event: images of the Twin Towers collapsing, people jumping to their deaths, and fire fighters bringing bodies out of the smoke flooded every television station and newsstand. In her article “Witnessing the Fall: September 11 and the Crisis of the Permeable Self,” Christine Muller writes:

September 11 occasioned the conscious awareness of our shared mortality, an awareness of the unavoidable instant of human helplessness that is the confrontation with death, an awareness generally latent until an encounter with trauma insists that we confront it....On such terms we can identify with other human beings by admitting our own susceptibility. (47)

Out of fear and “awareness of our shared mortality” came unity. A wave of reinvigorated patriotism swept over the nation: flags flew in people’s yards, bumper stickers and T-shirts bore slogans such as “United We Stand” and “These Colors Don’t Run,” people rushed to local blood banks to give blood, and recording artists cashed in on hugely popular songs about the catastrophe. Having suddenly found a reason to band together as an “us,” despite our differences, the next logical step was to make clear who was the “them.”

When President George W. Bush appeared on primetime television on the night of September 11, 2001, he did not officially name the perpetrators, but he did create a very clear image upon which the American public could cast its anger. He announced to the nation that “our way of life, our very freedom” was under attack, and that “America was targeted for attack

because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." He called the attacks "evil, despicable acts of terror" and asked Americans to call upon God to see them through this time, citing Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." He reinforced the newfound American unity by reminding citizens that they all had been "targeted" by an enemy, that their "freedom" was at stake, and that God was on their side, implying that He could not be on the side of those responsible: they were clearly "evil." Within days, the enemy had a name, Osama bin Laden, then-leader of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda, and a face, which appeared in national magazines, often over a bull's eye. Americans were now "us," and followers of al-Qaeda were most definitely "them."

The dilemma that then emerged was not one that Americans had experienced on such a large scale before. Although the United States had suffered an unprovoked attack on its own soil by Japan during World War II, those attackers had come from their own soil in their own aircrafts and had targeted a naval base. The attackers of September 11, however, entered the United States legally months or, in some cases, years before the attacks, received flight training at the hands of the very population they intended to target, and made weapons out of American aircrafts. They had flown under the radar, both literally and figuratively, and their success in carrying out their plans undetected proved that Americans did not know who they could trust. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of the casualties on September 11 were civilians rather than military personnel meant that anyone could be next; this realization led to what Muller calls the crisis of the "permeable self":

Witnessing in this way the precariousness of others and so, conceivably, that of our own agency and bodily integrity, foregrounds our sense of self by violating it, by showing what is troubling to contemplate: that we cannot completely control our lives and the circumstances that affect them. This breach generates a sense of ourselves as permeable. In effect, the permeable self is the experience of tension between

identification with and resistance to those who are vulnerable because their vulnerability prompts consideration of our own contingent power and fortune. (47)

Americans now felt exposed and powerless, which in turn made them seek ways in which to reclaim their agency and sense of security from those whom they felt had stolen it. Knowing that there might be other al-Qaeda operatives already living in the United States meant that recognizing “them” was not always an easy task; a shared sense of desperation and difficulty in determining exactly who presented a threat led to a rise in hate crimes, the victims of which were primarily members of non-affiliated groups, including immigrants of several nationalities, American citizens of Arab or Indian descent, Muslims, and Sikhs. To add to the public paranoia, an anthrax assault unwittingly carried out by the United States Postal Service began a week after the attacks, reawakening public fears of bioterrorism and making it unsafe to open a letter. Additionally, despite evidence and an eventual confession from bin Laden, conspiracy theories abounded about the attacks, naming several other groups, including the United States government, as the responsible party. Knowing exactly where to direct outrage over what felt like a personal violation became more confusing than ever.

It should come as no surprise that these national feelings of crisis both influenced and were further fueled by American cinema. As Muller writes, “cultural memory formations seek to foster a coherent narrative of a disrupting event to restore cultural cohesion” (52). Movies have, for decades, been one of the widest-reaching “cultural memory formations,” but, perhaps due to the high death toll and sensitive nature of the September 11 attacks, filmmakers waited several years before making movies about the actual events, and there have been only a few made at all to date. Instead, the years immediately following 2001 were inundated with a variety of catastrophe films that indirectly confronted (and perhaps exploited) post-September 11 fears. One character that emerged from this time period with great commercial success was what this chapter will refer to as the Apocalyptic Zombie.

3.1 Zombie 3.0: Defining the Apocalyptic Zombie

Films such as the *Resident Evil* series (2002 – 2010), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Planet Terror* (2007), *Quarantine* (2008), and *The Crazies* (2010) share common elements that form an entirely new kind of zombie and require a new definition. Even those that are remakes of earlier zombie films (or, in the case of *I Am Legend*, earlier films and a novel that are not, in fact, specifically about zombies) adapt the plotlines to fit better with growing trends. In these films, a zombie is not always a “zombie,” meaning that it is not always a resurrected dead (or presumed dead) body. The “death” of the person that will become the zombie is not always a literal death. More often than not in these films, a person is exposed to a zombifying agent either through his or her environment (usually a biological weapon, intentionally released or accidentally leaked into the air or water supply and contaminating the unsuspecting population, as seen in *Resident Evil*, *Planet Terror*, and *The Crazies*) or through human contact from those already infected with a viral or bacterial pathogen (as seen in *Dawn of the Dead*, *I Am Legend*, and *Quarantine*). Once exposed, the infected individual has a short incubation period before exhibiting symptoms that resemble a virus or bacterial infection, such as fever, vomiting, muscle spasms, and confusion or delirium; these get progressively worse until the zombifying agent takes full effect. Sometimes, in films such as *Resident Evil* and *Dawn of the Dead*, the initial progression of infection resembles the extraterrestrial zombie’s process, wherein the infected individual actually dies or appears to die, then revives after a few moments of apparent lifelessness and no longer recognizes loved ones, converses with others, or wishes to do much of anything except attack (and often devour) non-infected humans. In many cases, however, the individual’s symptoms progress uninterrupted to the final stage, the “death of humanity,” when he or she no longer responds to humans as another human with compassion and sensibility, but instead as a predator who acts on instinct, attacking and often infecting others.

Unlike most of their predecessors, these zombies are quick-moving and agile, often with superhuman strength or abilities. As a result, these zombies are much more individually dangerous than the extraterrestrial zombie, which, to a human in half-decent shape with a gun, a blade, a shovel, or even just the ability to run, does not pose a significant threat unless accompanied by a number of its cohorts circling in on that human. Taking on this new zombie is best done in a group, usually from a vantage point located safely atop a fortified building or in an armored car, and even with all the precautions, the group nearly always loses members throughout the course of the film. Individuals most likely to survive in these movies are fit, muscular, and attractive; they are usually in their twenties or thirties and often have a working knowledge of some form of martial arts as well as excellent aim with the guns from the private arsenals that they carry with them at all times.

These zombies' speed and strength also means that they possess the ability to attack substantially higher numbers of uninfected individuals in a short time span than the extraterrestrial zombie could, so the outbreak spreads much more quickly. In most of these films, it is only a matter of days or weeks until zombies account for an overwhelming majority of the population. Uninfected humans must go into survivalist mode; they often find themselves without running water, a steady food supply, or refrigeration to preserve perishables for any significant length of time, which means that they must venture out of their makeshift barracks for the essentials every couple of days or so. Often, governments shut down, hospitals cease to operate, and phone calls are impossible or futile. The uninfected have no one handing down any instruction, no medical or emergency assistance, and no way of getting in contact with friends or loved ones to locate them or find out whether or not they are infected. Whereas the extraterrestrial zombie is primarily a threat to those in isolated areas where survivors are more likely to be outnumbered, this zombie is capable of shutting down entire metropolitan areas in a few weeks' time, and those in isolated areas are often safer, as they are less likely to come into

contact with an infected individual (e.g., in *I Am Legend*, Anna tells Neville that she and Ethan are headed for a survivor colony in Vermont, which has been kept safe by its isolation).

Because the scope of this type of zombie epidemic is so massive, this chapter will refer to these zombies as Apocalyptic Zombies. As the name suggests, these zombies represent the age-old human fear of the world's end but with a more modern twist than plagues of locusts, unless those locusts happen to be carrying a lab-altered version of anthrax spores. This zombie represents widespread public fears (heightened by September 11) of human-created large-scale catastrophes. Rather than attributing the outbreak to magic, a divine power, or an astral body, these outbreaks are nearly always the repercussions of advanced science and genetic experimentation, including the creation of biological weapons (*Resident Evil*, *Planet Terror*, *Quarantine*, *The Crazies*) and searches for miracle cures (*I Am Legend*).

This name also fits because the films themselves often make clear allusions to existing notions of the Apocalypse; for example, in *Dawn of the Dead*, one televangelist in the movie voices his own theory that "Hell is overflowing, and Satan is sending his dead to us." While divine powers take the official credit for the outbreak in his conception of it, he keeps it in the vein of human-created catastrophes by stating to anyone watching his program that this is punishment "because you have sex out of wedlock, you kill unborn children, you have man on man relations, same sex marriage." According to him, the abundance of sinners has led to an overflow in Hell, and "when there is no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the Earth." Most modern film-goers already recognize this type of ominous rhetoric, as it not only occurs throughout the Bible but also surfaces routinely on the internet and television, often following catastrophic events such as the attacks of September 11, 2001,²⁴ Hurricane Katrina's near decimation of the city of New Orleans in August of 2005,²⁵ or Haiti's devastating earthquake on

²⁴ In an appearance on *The 700 Club* on September 13, 2001, Rev. Jerry Falwell explained that those "who have tried to secularize America," including "the pagans, the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians...the ACLU, People for the American Way," all "bear some burden for [the attacks]."

²⁵ In an appearance on NPR's *Fresh Air* on September 18, 2006, Pastor John Hagee told Terry Gross that "Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God on the city of New Orleans," which had "a level of sin that was offensive to God." He suggested that God struck the city when He did because "there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that Katrina came."

January 12, 2010.²⁶ Each of these disasters had a high death toll, and in each case, several prominent public figures made allusions to Noah's flood, the plagues in the Book of Exodus, and/or the signs of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelations. Because these types of prophetic warnings are so entrenched in Western culture, it is little wonder that a religious zealot makes some kind of appearance in nearly every apocalyptic zombie film, be this in the form of a televangelist or street preacher, an individual wearing a sandwich board or carrying a sign, or a graffiti message scrawled across an abandoned building.

Significantly, although individual characters might voice different opinions, in general, the films themselves do not present the apocalyptic scenario as being an act of God. Rather than addressing the situation as truly an act of divine retribution, the vast majority of commercially successful apocalyptic zombie films juxtapose religious rhetoric with a jaded sense of realization that the catastrophe is, in fact, man-made. In *I Am Legend*, for example, an exchange between Robert Neville and Anna reveals that Anna believes in signs; she tells Neville, "The world is quieter now. We just have to listen. If we listen, we can hear God's plan." In response, Neville, a scientist and non-believer, uses the facts in the scenario to point to his personal belief that there is no God:

Let me tell you about your God's plan: Six billion people on Earth when the infection hit. KV²⁷ had a ninety-percent kill rate; that's 5.4 billion people dead. Crashed and bled out. Dead. Less than one-percent immunity—that's twelve million healthy people....The other 588 million turned into your Dark Seekers, and then they got hungry, and they killed and fed on everybody....Every single person that you or I has ever known is dead. Dead! There is no God!

Although Neville does come to believe in signs just before his death, as the film ends, Anna tells us in a voice-over that "Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the

²⁶ In an appearance on *The 700 Club* on January 13, 2010, televangelist Pat Robertson reported that the earthquake occurred because 18th century Haitians "got together and swore a pact to the devil" in order to obtain freedom from their French colonizers. He went on to point out that "ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other," whereas their more God-fearing neighbors in the Dominican Republic have prospered.

²⁷ Krippen Virus, a fictional virus engineered from a strain of measles in an attempt to cure cancer.

restoration of humanity....We are his legacy. This is his legend.” Anna gives no indication that her faith has been shaken, but, since the movie opens with Dr. Alice Krippen’s statement that she has created this virus (originally intended to cure cancer) and closes with Anna’s statement that Neville has created a vaccine to cure the virus, it is clear that this is a human issue from start to finish; God takes none of the credit.

Even more indicative of the removal of the divine from the American apocalyptic zombie scenario is the revelation in *Quarantine* that the zombifying agent is a genetically engineered rabies-like virus, referred to as the “Armageddon Virus” in newspaper clippings uncovered in the penthouse apartment of the quarantined building. Stolen by a member of a doomsday cult from a military facility, it has now been unleashed upon the tenants of an apartment building in Los Angeles. Apart from the fact that this believer has taken it upon himself to use a man-made tool to bring about the end of the world (rather than waiting for God to do so), *Quarantine*’s American director and writers have actually made a deliberate choice to remove the divine element even further from an existing storyline. Although the rest of the movie is very nearly a shot-for-shot replica of the Spanish film *[REC]*, released a year earlier, with only minor changes to the characters and plot, *Quarantine* veers from *[REC]*’s story on one major point: the source of the virus. *[REC]*’s former penthouse tenant is not an Armageddon-happy cult member but rather an ill-fated agent for the Vatican, working to isolate and potentially cure the viral enzyme believed to be the cause of demonic possession. Depending on the one’s faith, this virus is either the product of demons or of nature; in either case, it is not created by humans, and the human who accidentally unleashed it on the entire apartment building had no intention of creating a pandemic, but was also unable to stop it.

Although an argument could be made that *[REC]* still qualifies as an apocalyptic zombie film on a broader scale, the predominant trend in American apocalyptic zombie films removes God from the equation, either in failing to address religious belief at all, failing to take it seriously (i.e., the religious characters are not the protagonists and, in cases such as *Quarantine*, are

actually the antagonists), or simply overriding any one character's belief with alternative explanations that make it pointedly clear that the zombie apocalypse will be humankind's destruction of its own.

Essentially, the Apocalyptic Zombie is stronger, faster, deadlier, and more plausible to an American audience expecting to be impressed by seemingly practical scientific explanations, and. It is not always literally dead, and, in cases such as *The Crazies*, it is even fairly articulate (if psychotic and bloodthirsty) right up to the very end. Perhaps most importantly, the American Apocalyptic Zombie is man-made. There is no black magic, no falling asteroid, and no divine retribution; the zombie epidemic is the result of human action, and humans must either defeat it or die trying.

3.2 Dawn of the Post-September 11 Undead

The Apocalyptic Zombie reveals a significant shift in American perception from that characterized in earlier zombie films. The nature of these zombie outbreaks suggests that the most significant fear in the twenty-first century is fear that the United States (together with Western advancement) will be the source of its own downfall. The society featured in American apocalyptic zombie films clearly considers itself to be wealthy, powerful, and at the height of technological sophistication. Too big to feel significantly threatened by another colonizer, a force of nature, or even the divine, the United States of the apocalyptic zombie film is "at the top of the heap," with nowhere to go but down, and its biggest threat comes from within: its own citizens. The zombifying agent is both created by and spread by Americans. It does not discriminate based upon race, gender, or social class; rather, it is an equal opportunity killer, and the zombies created by it are what writer and *GQ* contributor Tom Carson calls "the planet's most democratic monsters" in his article "Zombies, as American as Apple Pie" (117). He suggests that "vampires are a fantasy of elitism—a riff on decadent old-world aristocracy," whereas "zombies, in their 'We the People' way, are the sickest possible parody of Jefferson-

style egalitarianism” (118). Viewers cannot ignore the possibility that, given an apocalyptic zombie scenario, they might be most threatened by family, friends, or neighbors. Furthermore, unlike werewolves, who become something other than their human selves when they kill, zombies “used to be just like us and still dress the part” (Carson 118); a person would easily recognize his or her parent, child, spouse, or friend as said loved one feasted on his or her flesh. These films ask American audiences to consider the possibility that they could very likely be the source of their own destruction. Fear of the monster has become fear of becoming the monster.

In their article “Attack of the Livid Dead: Recalibrating Terror in the Post-September 11 Zombie Film,” Nick Muntean and Matthew Thomas Payne point to the explosion of zombie films since 2002 and assert that the post-September 11 zeitgeist manifests in the form of the zombie with great horrific success because it reveals “all of the unsavory elements required for the perpetuation of the Western way of life” (243). They discuss the “dark underside of capitalism,” where consumers, like zombies, run rampant and consume for the sake of consuming, preying on the resources and cheap labor of poorer, less powerful countries in the process, and revealing all that is “ugly and abject” in human nature. They write:

This critical symbolic function of zombies is strikingly similar to what many commentators saw as both the literal and symbolic message of the September 11 attacks—that America’s global financial and political hegemony had only been attainable through the subjugation and abjection of distant lands and peoples. (243)

In other words, zombies make visible the symbolically “ugly” aspects of a consumer-driven society with their grotesque appearances, their ravenous appetites, and their forceful predatory behaviors.

Zombies also represent the threat from within discussed earlier, which is particularly frightening to a post-September 11 audience awakened to the fact that “the Other [is] now inside our own borders” (244). Like these terrorists, the zombie comes from within, and what

better disguise could it get than that of an ordinary human, perhaps even a loved one? As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in his essay "Monster Culture: Seven Theses," monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6). He goes on to point out that "the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes—as 'that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis.'" In the case of this particular monster, the zombie, who is not a human hybrid like the werewolf or the vampire but is still theoretically human, the crisis introduced by the monster comes after Muller's crisis of the "permeable self"; having already been confronted with their own mortality after September 11, Americans were left to determine who, exactly, was the enemy. While it is easy enough to think of "us" versus "them," it is not that clear cut in life or in zombie films. The terrorists of September 11, like zombies, were like us, but not quite. Like zombies, they looked like people we might know or pass on the street every day. Like zombies, they were still biologically human. The dilemma faced by the uninfected when a person becomes infected in an apocalyptic zombie film reminds viewers of the dilemma presented any time one population is at war with another: How "human" is the other side? Is the enemy "inhuman" enough to justify what technically amounts to homicide? In most apocalyptic zombie films, the characters at some point argue over when is the appropriate time to kill an infected individual. Some characters (sometimes even those who are infected) insist upon immediate action, arguing that there is no point in dragging out the inevitable and potentially endangering those who remain uninfected. Others find themselves unable to end the life of someone who is possibly a friend or loved one but who is most certainly a fellow human being. Sometimes they have a change of heart once the infected individual has become snarling and violent, but some refuse to pull the trigger even then and are forced to either run away or succumb to the zombie's attack. In the wake of September 11, many Americans were wondering what, exactly, the criteria were for demonizing an enemy. How

different from “us” is too different? Was it enough to be simply a Muslim? Should we take out our anger on all non-Christians? What about on all non-Americans? Questions about degrees of humanity, born out of fear, make the zombie an especially terrifying monster to a post-September 11 audience.

Equally timely and terrifying are the moral and ethical dilemmas often presented in apocalyptic zombie films. Like the September 11 attacks, these zombies offer a response to moral and ethical decisions that the United States has made (and continues to make) as a world power. By their own admission, al-Qaeda targeted the United States in response to its involvement in the Middle East, which, as Muntean and Payne suggest, is at least partially motivated by financial interests in the region. Whether the United States acted morally or immorally with regard to the Middle East is beside the point, but it cannot be denied that the attacks resulted from al-Qaeda’s perception of American international morality. This devastating event, like other acts of war before it, forced many Americans to reconsider the weight of decisions made by a country with as much power as the United States has; it is perhaps not coincidental, then, that the central theme of most post-September 11 zombie films is the idea that the United States has finally gone too far in its testing and experimenting for consumers’ sake and has caused itself to implode.

To clarify, although “the most financially successful zombie films” feature the Apocalyptic Zombie as defined in the previous section (Muntean 240), the most common themes of these films are not entirely unique to post-September 11 zombie films. As previously mentioned, at the heart of nearly all apocalyptic zombie films is the move away from the supernatural or extraterrestrial as destructive force and the in-depth look at the potentially catastrophic consequences of human actions. Zombie films dealing with the consequences of genetic engineering and biological weapons are certainly in the minority prior to 2001, but they are not unheard of; examples include *Revenge of the Zombies*²⁸ (1943) and the original version

²⁸ In *Revenge of the Zombies*, a mad scientist attempts to engineer a race of undead soldiers for the Third Reich.

of *The Crazies*²⁹ (1973), as well as the original survival horror video game *Resident Evil*³⁰ (1996). These types of moral and ethical dilemmas within the zombie film occur in increasingly larger doses as technology improves and allows the population to witness more and more of the man-made atrocities of war, such as mustard gas, nuclear bombs, and Agent Orange. Given the influx of genetic engineering and biological weaponry over the years, as well as the many ways in which information can be rapidly disseminated to large numbers of people, the Apocalyptic Zombie might well have evolved on its own without the added push of the nature of the September 11 attacks, but it is no surprise that, in their aftermath, this zombie has nearly taken over the genre. The seeds for this abundance of apocalyptic zombie films were certainly already planted, but easy access to clips of and information regarding the attacks themselves and the ensuing military actions reawakened a fear in the American populace that seems to have caused those seeds to flourish.

3.3 Resurrecting the Zombie (Film): Appropriating Earlier Films for a Post-September 11 Audience

Moral and ethical dilemmas might be at the heart of the apocalyptic zombie film, but they are not the only common threads. Significantly, nearly all commercially successful zombie films in recent years have been remakes or adaptations. Because these films enter into an existing conversation with something that is the same in name but different in presentation, the ways in which they have been altered reveals the most about the thought behind them.

As mentioned previously, the film *Quarantine* (2008) is an Americanized version of the Spanish film *[REC]* (2007), which mimics the story of the original in nearly every way except in a few extended sequences (seemingly added more for horrific effect than for actual plot development) and in the final scenes, when it reveals the cause of the zombie outbreak. Rather than go ahead with the Spanish storyline about the virus being the biological cause of demonic

²⁹ In *The Crazies*, the residents of a small town are accidentally infected by a biological weapon engineered by the military.

³⁰ In the *Resident Evil* game series, players must survive in the aftermath of a viral outbreak that has made zombies of much of the population.

possession, American screenwriter and director John Erick Dowdle, along with fellow screenwriter Drew Dowdle, wrote a script in which the virus is a biological weapon stolen from a military facility. Newspaper clippings found in the penthouse apartment reveal that a “doomsday cult” is behind the theft, and, although the now-absent cult member’s motives are not as clear as the motives of the tenant in *[REC]* (in which the two surviving characters conveniently stumble upon a tape recorder on which the agent has recorded his observations and conclusions regarding the virus), the lab equipment and numerous cages containing mice and lab rats in one room of the apartment suggest animal experimentation. Since the virus’s first victim was a dog belonging to a little girl in the building, and the cult allegedly has a doomsday-related agenda, the viewer will likely make the assumption that his intent was the spread the virus, which acts quickly, causes those infected to experience rabies-like symptoms, and ultimately leads the infected to attack, cannibalize, and infect others.

The removal of both demons and nature (if the virus is, in fact, just another virus) and the insertion of a doomsday scenario completely orchestrated by humans is arguably more frightening to a post-September 11 American audience, which has been inundated with news about biological weapons and about the potential horrors of allowing the government too much power over its citizens’ lives (e.g., the Patriot Act, NSA wire-tapping, etc.). Although the Spanish government agencies in *[REC]* are by no means the protagonists of the story, the government operatives in *Quarantine* are clearly counted among the antagonists: the virus was engineered by the military, the authorities failed to apprehend the suspects and contain the outbreak, the building was quarantined by the Center for Disease Control with no intention of attempting to save the lives of those inside, and, while the Spanish authorities merely warn the characters that failure to stay away from the doors and windows will force them to take “drastic measures,” the American audience actually witnesses the shooting death of one of the tenants by one of multiple snipers trained on the building; the sniper does not hesitate, and he does not give a warning of “drastic measures” to follow. Whereas the Spanish authorities are responding to a

crisis that they could not have prevented and can only hope to contain, the American authorities have failed to protect their citizens on every count from a killer that they would not have needed protection from if the United States military had not created it in the first place.

Director Breck Eisner's 2010 remake of *The Crazies* plays on similar themes to those seen in *Quarantine*: the government has engineered a rabies-like biological weapon called the "Trixie Virus," which, through government negligence, has been accidentally released into the water supply of a small town in Iowa. The infected begin to behave erratically, beginning with violent, unprovoked outbursts that lead to such acts as killing loved ones or burning their own houses down. As is the case in *Quarantine*, the government seems to have no plan for or intention of curing the infected residents and calls in the military to contain the entire town. Because physical signs of infection (predominantly bulging blood vessels and eye discoloration) do not usually manifest until after the infected individual has driven his pitchfork through someone, soldiers test residents for early signs of infection and separate the infected from the uninfected, thus leading the audience to believe that they intend to evacuate the healthy population. This, of course, does not go according to plan; in their paranoia, the military ends up executing even the intended evacuees and ultimately destroys the entire town in a massive explosion, which the government claims was caused by a fire at a chemical plant in the area.

The major plot points follow those of the 1973 film directed by George A. Romero, who also produced and co-wrote the remake. While the government is at the root of the infection in both cases, however, military and government personnel come across as much more sympathetic characters in the earlier version. The original film alternates between scenes focused on the town and scenes focused on government efforts to contain the virus; in the remake, the government loses its voice entirely, and, much like in *Quarantine*, the audience is just as in the dark as the characters, who do not know when or if they will be rescued and what, exactly, is happening around them. In the original, the government scientists are frantically working on a vaccine, which, tragically, gets lost when the infected townspeople kill the doctor

attempting to cure them; in the remake, the audience sees no indication of any attempt to discover a cure. In the original, military officer Colonel Peckem shows some remorse for having to abandon the town to chaos in the end; in the remake, the audience has no way of knowing how the officials who ordered the towns' destruction or the soldiers charged with delivering the bomb felt about the operation because those characters are absent from the film. Without the government perspective or even a face to suggest any kind of humanity, the audience cannot hear that side of the story, knows nothing of the government's intentions until the final explosion, and is unlikely to side with anyone but the uninfected townspeople. For an audience that, as Muntean and Payne suggest, has been confronted in the years since 2001 (aided by global media) with the realization that its government does not always share vital pieces of information about its citizens' security with them and does not always act in a way that seems entirely altruistic, the situations presented in both the remake of *The Crazies* and in *Quarantine* seem particularly terrifying because they ring true: unsuspecting civilians fall victim to a threat that came from within their own country, have no way of knowing what they are dealing with and no recourse of any kind, and are left to destroy each other or are outright killed by their government.

Director Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007) varies significantly from *Quarantine* and *The Crazies* in that its writers and director created an apocalyptic zombie film out of a story that was not technically about zombies. Richard Matheson's 1954 novel of the same name was previously adapted into two film versions, *The Last Man on Earth* in 1964 (which George Romero claimed inspired him in his creation of *Night of the Living Dead*) and *The Omega Man* in 1971, but none of these three quite fits into the zombie genre. Both the novel and *The Last Man on Earth* depict a worldwide pandemic of contagious vampirism, to which the main character alone is immune. These vampires, even if not entirely human, maintain a control that zombies cannot and even form their own societies. Ultimately, the protagonist, who has made it his mission to hunt the vampires, is caught and sentenced to die; he realizes just before his

death that because he is the last of his kind, he is the “freak” in a world now dominated by vampires. *The Omega Man* alters the story significantly; rather than the human race’s succumbing to a virus, nuclear warfare has killed the majority of the population and mutated most of the survivors into a cult of night-dwelling albinos who call themselves “The Family” and take it upon themselves to destroy all remnants of their former culture, especially technology. The protagonist creates a cure for the mutations and attempts to distribute it, but the Family views him as the unnatural one and, despite his valiant efforts, ultimately rejects his vaccine and kills him. In all three cases, the beings (either vampire or mutant) are certainly post-human but are not the unthinking, unfeeling, animalistic creatures typically found in zombie films; they retain their language, their desire for a structured society, and even their names. Also in all three versions, at least one character (usually one who is infected but to a lesser degree who has formed some kind of relationship with the uninfected protagonist) insists that, whatever their condition, they should still be viewed as equal to humans.

The 2007 film takes a different approach toward the infected, bringing the story firmly into the realm of the Apocalyptic Zombie. The “Dark-Seekers,” as lone New York City survivor Dr. Robert Neville calls them, are not contributing characters as they are in the previous versions; instead, they are predators that Neville must avoid or kill on contact. The potentially sympathetic elements have been removed, including language (they primarily emit blood-curdling screeches) and typical human appearance (they are hairless and have a lean, vein-popping, steroidal muscular appearance). Neville, who is attempting to develop a cure for the cancer-treatment-turned-zombifying-virus, spends much of the first half of the film recording his observations on a tape recorder. Although alone with only his dog for companionship, he continues his work as a scientist, offering medical explanations for the Dark-Seekers’ behavior, explaining that they only come out at night because they have a painful intolerance to UV radiation, and revealing that their increased speed and strength (the result of an increased metabolism) makes them rapacious eaters who have exhausted their food supply, leading them

to cannibalism. By making it clear that they are subjects for study and experimentation and adding commentary such as, "Social de-evolution appears complete. Typical human behavior is now entirely absent," there is no mistaking where he stands on the subject of their humanity. By completely dehumanizing the Dark-Seekers after asserting that this was a catastrophe created by advanced science and medical experimentation, the film expresses a culturally divisive fear that surfaces every so often with media attention on new scientific developments and legislation of such issues as cloning, stem-cell research, and even in vitro fertilization and vaccinations. It is important to keep in mind, however, that it is this same medical experimentation that ultimately solves the problem when Neville finds the cure.

Apart from the fact that Neville refers to the initial site of the infection in New York City as "Ground Zero," which has become the popular name for the site where the Twin Towers fell, the film tailors itself to a post-September 11 audience by giving them what many other apocalyptic zombie films (and the earlier versions of this film) do not: a clear-cut distinction between "us" and "them." Even though Neville is searching for a cure to the Dark-Seekers' illness, his behavior toward them makes it plain that he does not view them as human or equal to himself in their present condition. Viewers do not see the dilemma of decreasing humanity that other films portray because they enter the story at a point when all those who are susceptible to the virus have died or become Dark-Seekers, and the few who are immune do not have to worry about the possibility of infection. Neville does find himself surprised sometimes by the Dark-Seekers, when they do things such as expose themselves to sunlight when one of their own has been captured and set traps for him, but his acceptance that they are still human as they are is never fully realized. His conclusion that they could be (but are not currently) human is entirely the product of the post-September 11 audience; in the original ending, the angry mob of Dark-Seekers that descends upon Neville's house retreats once the alpha male indicates to Neville by smearing the shape of a butterfly with his hand on the glass between them that he has come only for the female Dark-Seeker (identifiable by a butterfly

tattoo) that Neville has been using as his most recent test subject. Realizing that they are still more human than he realized, he hands over the female and apologizes, and the alpha male leaves with his posse. Neville is then seen driving with Anna and Ethan to the survivor colony in Vermont; there is no further discussion of a cure, and the audience hears Anna's voice on a radio transmission urging others to join them, assuring them, "You are not alone." Rather than attempting to change the Dark-Seekers, they have chosen to leave them alone and instead try to seek out more like themselves.

This ending was not well-received by test audiences, so the directors filmed the ending that most viewers are familiar with, where Neville realizes that he can, in fact, cure the virus and then sacrifices his own life so that Anna and Ethan can escape with the vaccine, presumably to salvage the human race by making the Dark-Seekers human again. It is possible that an audience found it necessary for Neville to die, since his character dies in the book and the two previous movies, or perhaps it has to do with Isabel Pinedo's concept of the postmodern horror film mentioned in the previous chapter, wherein the master narrative breaks down and order is not restored. Although the exact reason for the original ending's poor reception is unknown, however, it seems likely that a post-September 11 audience, while receptive to the possibility of a "cure" for the Dark-Seekers, would be uncomfortable with Neville's recognition of the Dark-Seekers' humanity and acceptance that he could not change them and did not really need to, as this forces the viewers to look at the gray area rather than viewing the enemy in black and white terms (in other words, something that is not "us" and needs to be "cured"). For an audience looking for a hero to identify with in their own time of crisis, already well into military actions on multiple fronts and debating whether or not remaining in the Middle East was the best idea for the United States, there was no desire for ambivalence. The "good guy" had to either "win" or die trying, and this required that the "them" remain completely separate from "us."

3.4 Playing Prometheus: The Cautionary Tale in the Apocalyptic Zombie Film

More than half of all zombie movies have been made in a post-September 11 world³¹; many of these films have met with enormous financial success, and American audiences continue to demand them for their consumption. Part of the reason for this increased demand is clear: the zombie is the perfect vehicle for creating an Other who emerges from within the society and, therefore, the perfect vehicle for expressing fears of terrorism. Nearly all recent zombie films have an even stronger underlying theme, however, which began to surface with the Extraterrestrial Zombie and became even more pronounced following September 11, 2001: tampering with nature, forcing ourselves out of safety and into science that we cannot yet fully understand, and refusing to see in our pride that we cannot always control what we have created can only lead to catastrophe.

This cautionary tale has been circulating in societies all over the world for thousands of years. In his epic poem *Theogony* (written circa 700 B.C.E.), Greek poet Hesiod tells the story of the Titan Prometheus, who stole the secret of fire from Zeus and gave it to humans. As punishment for tampering with the natural order (as established by the ancient Greeks), he was strapped to a rock, where an eagle ate out his liver, only to have it grow back every night and be eaten again the next day. Roman poet Ovid writes in his poem *Metamorphoses* (early first century C.E.) of Icarus, who used wax wings constructed by his father Daedalus to escape his and his father's imprisonment by King Minos. Despite having been warned by his father not to fly too close to the sun, in his pride, he did so anyway, causing his wings to melt and him to plummet to his death. Similarly, the Jews have the myth of the golem, whose most well-known incarnation, that of the Golem of Prague (sixteenth century C.E.), was constructed of clay and brought to life by a rabbi hoping to protect his people from anti-Semitic attacks. The golem initially killed Gentiles but then turned on the Jews and, ultimately, its creator, who had tampered with a power that he could not fully understand or control.³²

³¹ See the History Channel's *Zombies: A Living History* (2011).

³² See Dan Bilefsky, "Hard Times Give New Life to Prague's Golem," *New York Times*, 11 May 2009.

Nineteenth-century British novelist Mary Shelley was perhaps the first writer to incorporate both the familiar cautionary tale and zombies in her novel *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). In response to actual scientific experiments taking place at the time, she told the fictional story of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, who constructs a monster out of body parts and reanimates the corpse using electric shocks. The doctor begins to see the folly of his experiment when the monster turns out to have violent, murderous tendencies; however, he agrees to create a mate for his creation when the monster insists that having a companion will essentially “keep him out of trouble.” Upon realizing that this union could produce an entire race of murderous monsters, however, the doctor attempts to prevent this from happening by destroying the monster’s would-be bride, but he pays the price when the monster, in turn, kills his bride.

In this same way, both Extraterrestrial and Apocalyptic Zombie films address societal fears about the possible consequences of tampering with nature in ways that we cannot fully comprehend or control, all in the name of being “at the top”; while the Extraterrestrial Zombie allows for the possibility of destruction from an outside party, however, the Apocalyptic Zombie places the blame squarely on the shoulders of humankind. Apocalyptic Zombie films look at the “dark underside” of the American race to be the best and most powerful, even when this self-serving ambition plays out at the expense of another population; the terrorists responsible for September 11 name this as a major reason for their attack, claiming that continued American involvement in the Middle East has more to do with economic benefit to the United States than altruism (Muntean 243). Confronting these concerns in the form of science fiction is perhaps an American audience’s “safe” method for critiquing American values and actions without openly buying into the idea of our having instigated these attacks in any way, and without having to actually stop progress and risk falling behind other nations.

CHAPTER 4

PREPAREDNESS 101: ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

On May 16, 2011, an article by Assistant Surgeon General Rear Admiral Ali S. Khan appeared on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Public Health Matters Blog entitled “Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse.” Although Khan does not directly state his cause for issuing this particular public service announcement, it did appear on the blog only five days prior to the date that Christian radio broadcaster Harold Camping had named as the start date for the biblical Rapture and subsequent five-month period of plagues and chaos for non-believers until the world’s destruction. Camping and his supporters footed the bill for most of the publicity campaign themselves; however, the media picked up the story and, as is often the case with popular apocalypse theories, a small degree of public panic ensued. The blog, with the tagline “Sharing our stories on preparing for and responding to public events,” is the CDC’s attempt to combat public panic, whatever the scope, as it arises; Khan and other health professionals working for the CDC provide Americans with policy information and instructional material addressing issues from hurricanes to H1N1 outbreaks to potential terrorist attacks. Given the implausible nature of Camping’s prophecy (using the same biblical numerology, Camping had predicted the world’s end on two previous occasions and had been wrong on both counts), knowing exactly what public fear to address was perhaps a difficult task, so Khan went with “Zombie Apocalypse,” telling the History Channel in an interview several months later that his goal was to find “a creative way to engage people in thinking about their own personal preparedness.” It worked—the blog post went viral on social networking sites such as Facebook

and Twitter, and high traffic volume to the previously little-known CDC blog caused the site to crash within 72 hours.³³

Although the article is satirical in nature, it does list the steps that the government would take and that individuals should take in the event of an actual zombie apocalypse as well as in “*real* emergencies...hurricanes or pandemics for example.” Along with providing a list of supplies to include in an emergency kit, Khan recommends creating an emergency plan; steps include deciding upon a family meeting place “to regroup in case zombies invade your home or your town evacuates because of a hurricane,” identifying emergency contacts, and planning an evacuation route. The article goes on to assure concerned citizens that the United States government is, in fact, prepared to handle this emergency should it arise:

If zombies did start roaming the streets, CDC would conduct an investigation much like any other disease outbreak. CDC would provide technical assistance to cities, states, or international partners dealing with a zombie infestation. This assistance might include consultation, lab testing and analysis, patient management and care, tracking of contacts, and infection control (including isolation and quarantine)....Not only would scientists be working to identify the cause and cure of the zombie outbreak, but CDC and other federal agencies would send medical teams and first responders to help those in affected areas.

In a post dated October 5, 2011, Khan notes with some surprise that “Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse” elicited an “overwhelming” public response and that numerous people had written, called, and commented to say that, thanks to the tips offered in this post, they were now prepared for any emergency, including a zombie outbreak.

Because his earlier post was so well-received, Khan followed it up with an interview with Max Brooks, author of best-selling books *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) and *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006), the latter of which is set to hit theaters in

³³ See “‘Zombie Apocalypse’ Campaign Crashes CDC Website,” *Scientific American*, 19 May 2011.

2012 as a major motion picture starring Brad Pitt. When asked why he thought that zombies had become such a popular subject in contemporary culture, Brooks explained:

I think zombie stories express the current societal anxieties we're all confronting on a daily basis....A lot of people have disaster preparedness on the brain, and it's a lot "safer," psychologically, to ruminate on a zombie disaster rather than, say, a hurricane or an earthquake-induced tsunami. When confronted with real anxiety, a lot of people shut down....Make it a zombie attack, though, then there's some psychological padding.

This statement coincides with the first of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses on monsters: "The monster's body is a cultural body" (4). Throughout human history, the monster has represented a safe or distanced space for projections of "fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (Cohen 4). For Khan to address a legitimate concern to the American populace in this fashion and for it to have been so well-received shows that zombies are monsters currently very much on Americans' minds, which would not be the case if the creatures did not reveal something significant about the zeitgeist.

Judging by the film references that Khan makes, his post also serves an additional purpose, which is to address the idea widely presented in more recent zombie films that the government cannot be trusted to take care of its people and might actually be the killer in the end. Because that perception could be a source of public panic in and of itself, Khan attempts to circumvent that by offering advice and appealing to American readers on their terms. Of course, anyone truly convinced that the government will bring about the destruction of humanity is likely to suggest that he is offering lip service rather than actual comfort and advice,³⁴ but there would be no convincing those readers anyway. By presenting the subject in a humorous way, Khan attempts to make it seem ludicrous that the government is currently hard at work on some variation of anthrax, kuru, rabies, or measles that will turn you and everyone you know into

³⁴ Among other critics, Chris Good of *The Atlantic* wrote in his article entitled "Why Did the CDC Develop a Plan for a Zombie Apocalypse?" (20 May 2011), "If a zombie apocalypse does happen...DO NOT follow the CDC's guidelines as your only course of action," as it "includes no mention of shotguns, torches, hot-wiring cars, seeking high ground, traveling at night vs. day, or really any worthwhile strategy for keeping zombies out of your house."

zombies. Khan is not alone in creating distance using humor: recently, the “zom com,” or a comedy based on zombies (e.g., *Shaun of the Dead* [2004] and *Zombieland* [2009]), has become a film genre unto itself, and zombies are currently being used in a comedic fashion to market everything from Jane Austen classics³⁵ to sex toys.³⁶

The idea of considering societal concerns while still keeping them somewhat removed from our own lives is not only appealing but even profitable: analysts for the website *24/7 Wall St.* have estimated that, including movie ticket and DVD sales, “video games, comic books, novels, Halloween costumes, zombie walks, merchandise, conventions, and even zombie art,” the zombie industry is currently worth upwards of \$5.74 billion to the American economy.³⁷ All of this functions as the “psychological padding” that allows Americans to address from a safe distance the actual underlying fears that zombies present, such as oppression, prejudice, consequences of advanced science and the hubris that comes with it, meddling with nature or the natural order, and government conspiracy. The booming zombie business, however, makes it clear that these fears are at least at the back of many Americans’ minds; hopefully, by understanding why this monster functions the way that it does in American cinema, we can attempt to address the underlying fears that rise from the dead again and again in the form of the zombie.

³⁵ See *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance – Now With Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem!* (2009) by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith.

³⁶ See “How to Defeat Zombies Using Sex Toys” (19 October 2011) on the *Lovehoney: The Sexual Happiness People* website.

³⁷ See “Zombies Worth Over \$5 Billion to Economy” at *247wallst.com*, 25 October 2011.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ronni M. Davis holds an Associate of Arts Degree with Cornerstone Honors from Tarrant County College and graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from the University of Texas at Arlington. She taught first-year composition at UT Arlington for three years and hopes to return to the classroom after earning her Master of Arts Degree in English and then pursuing her doctoral studies at UT Arlington. Her research interests include postcolonial theory, gender theory, and monster theory. Ronni is also an active novelist and has published two short stories and two poems in the literary magazines *In the Margins* (Arlington High School) and *The Quill* (Sigma Tau Delta, University of Texas at Arlington). Ronni lives in Arlington, Texas, with her husband Kristopher Sandoval, their daughter Scarlet, her parents Ron and Piper Davis, and their pets, Gryffindor, Neville Longbottom, and Draco Malfoy Betty White.